

CAPITALIZING RACE:
DIASPORIC NARRATIVES AND GLOBAL ASIA

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YUAN DING

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Dedication

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Abstract

Since the 1970s, the focus of the field of Asian American Studies has gone through dramatic shifts, from its early archival efforts to preserve the immigrant experience, repudiate orientalist stereotypes and demand for civil liberties, to a more recent turn towards globalization and transnationalism. Since the 1965 immigration reform, which abolished the long-standing discriminatory national quota system limiting Asian immigration into the US, Asian Americans have surpassed Hispanics to become the fastest growing minority group in the US. This influx of Asian Americans in the last half of the 20th century coincides with the ascension of Asia in the global economy, and both developments anticipate the adoption of neoliberal multiculturalist policies within the US nation-state. These developments challenge Asian American Studies to shift away from cultural nationalist debates over representational authenticity vs. cultural hybridity towards a more self-reflective engagement with the demands of the neoliberal literary and cultural market. Addressing this change of direction in the field, my dissertation, “Capitalizing Race: Diasporic Narratives and Global Asia,” analyzes the ways in which race gets capitalized in the works by contemporary diasporic Asian writers, who deploy economic tropes and neoliberal logics to narrate the Asian diasporic identity and experience. In dialogue with other recent critical interventions that have sought to reframe the Asian American and Asian diasporic identity in relation to the proliferation of global capitalism such as *Flexible Citizenship* (1999), *Economic Citizens* (2007) and *Liquidated* (2009), “Capitalizing Race” argues that Asian diasporic agency is shaped by and in turn regulates the proliferation of flexible, transnational capital.

Examining how contemporary fiction situates the Asian diaspora in the context of the global circulation of capital and mass media imaginaries, “Capitalizing Race” concludes that the rhetorical production of “ethnicity” is an economic process, governed by the neoliberal logic of the literary, cultural market. Delving into the ways in which human mobility is dictated by and signified through financial liquidity, “Capitalizing Race” illuminates the neoliberal multiculturalist aesthetics operating in some of the texts analyzed here. I’m weary of the uncritical celebration of their flexible accumulation of cultural capital, which, I argue, detracts from the Asian diasporic community’s effort to achieve greater political representation and equality.

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Chapter I: Introduction

August 2018, otherwise known as “#AsianAugust,” marked a “watershed moment” for Asian American cultural representation in mainstream US media, or so read the headlines.¹ Even before its release, the movie *Crazy Rich Asians*, adapted from Kevin Kwan’s 2013 bestselling novel and the first volume of a trilogy, set the internet abuzz with much anticipation. Immediately after its premiere, reviews appeared ubiquitously, even making their way into highbrow publications like the *New Yorker*, *Guardian*, *Aljazeera*, *New York Times* and *Washington Post*. It was almost hard to fathom that this much creative energy and critical attention was devoted to a mere romantic comedy. In the meantime, social media added to the production team’s publicity blitz with tales of movie-goers purchasing extra tickets, or even buying out entire showings to help generate box office momentum. Their efforts paid off. In just a couple of weeks, *Crazy Rich Asians* became one of the highest grossing Hollywood romantic comedies in recent times, with an unprecedentedly high audience retention rate. This is a dramatic feat, given that the movie features an exclusively Asian cast, something that hadn’t happened since Wayne Wang’s 1993 adaptation of the *Joy Luck Club*.

I start my dissertation with this anecdote for two reasons. One, the commercial success of the *Crazy* movie marks a watershed moment indeed, but not so much for Asian American cultural *representation* as it is for Asian American cultural *politics*. For, as many reviewers rightly noted, Hollywood’s representation of racial and cultural diversity is often reductive, fetishistic, not to mention fleeting. However, the sheer amount of critical attention generated by the *Crazy Rich Asians* franchise, both lay and academic, signals something altogether different from mere representational validation. In specific,

it is against the 1993 adaptation of *Joy Luck Club*, a comparable moment in history where a major Hollywood production with an all-Asian cast was proven profitable, that *Crazy Rich Asians* marks a clear shift. As with the *Joy Luck Club*, the box office win of *Crazy* marks a moment in which multiculturalist demands for representational diversity in US mainstream media succeeds not only in generating outstanding economic profit for the studios, but also in transforming such economic gains into cultural and symbolic capital for the Asian American community. What is different this time is the nature of the narrative. In an interview on his decision to write a tale of Asian wealth, Kwan refers to Tan and Kingston as representatives of the traditional Asian immigrant narratives, against which he writes.² The *Crazy* trilogy, Kwan explains, redirects the western narrative on Asia and Asians from one mired in the struggles over assimilation to one that better reflects the economic rise of Asia.

Attributing the Asian diaspora to the proliferation of global capital, the *Crazy* trilogy typifies what I call a narrative of “Asian racial uplift,” characterized by the depiction of Asian diasporic “flexibility” in terms of both capital accumulation and global mobility. According to Grace Hong, “post-World War II rise in speculative capital and the simultaneous emergence of an Asian capitalist class register a shift in modes of value from production to speculation and from labor to existence itself” (108). “Model Minority discourse,” Hong goes on, “trades on a fetishization of mobility, associating Asian diasporic populations with Asian capital as entities to be courted and as proof of the benefits of Western-style capitalism” (Hong 112). This rhetorical link between Asian bodies and Asian capital rendered through the trope of “mobility”, or rather “flexibility,” I argue, is the main characteristic of the narrative of “global Asian racial uplift” seen in a

rising number of Asian characters on television in cinema, culminating in the *Crazy* movie. Whereas Hong reads the *Crazy* trilogy as part of a “global model minority” discourse, I propose a reading that stands outside the framework of the US nation-state attendant in the loaded meaning of “model minority.” Although widely celebrated within the entertainment industry as the positive result of the so-called colorblind casting practices, this trend in representational inclusivity in mainstream media has come under scrutiny for reproducing the neoliberal (post)racial logic. My critique of neoliberal multiculturalism is built on the works of Jodi Melamed, who argues that:

Race continues to permeate capitalism’s economic and social processes, organizing the hyperextraction of surplus value from racialized bodies and naturalizing a system of capital accumulation that grossly favors the global North over the global South. Yet multiculturalism portrays neoliberal policy as the key to a postracist world of freedom and opportunity (“The Spirit” 1).

The *Crazy* movie, as chapter two will demonstrate, exemplifies this type of neoliberal multiculturalist paean to a global capitalist (post)racial world order. Nowhere more does one see how neoliberal corporate interests drive representational diversity than in advertising. In fact, corporations vie for a chance to be the industry leader in championing diversity in their ads, as a way to tap into previously untapped markets of the minority population. Despite some flops (e.g. Kendall Jenner’s Pepsi protest ad³), most win praises, whether it is Pantene for gender equality⁴, Dove for body positivity⁵ and racial diversity, or more recently, Budweiser for immigrants⁶.

Nonetheless, through cultural consumption, Asian Americans have transformed their ticket dollars into collective cultural capital with the blessing of neoliberal

multiculturalism, and such cultural capital has the promise to reproduce itself. When interviewed about the collective decision to turn down a lucrative buyout offer from Netflix in preference for Warner Bros, Chu justifies the decision by pointing out the symbolic capital residing in the cinema: "We were gifted this position to make a decision no one else can make, which is turning down the big payday for rolling the dice [on the box office] — but being invited to the big party, which is people paying money to go see us."⁷ One of the movie's producers, Nina Jacobson, further points to the ways in which the cultural capital of a big screen win can change the rules of the industry: "You can look at *Get Out*, you can look at *Black Panther* — it changes the whole economics of the business when movies like that succeed."⁸ In addition to the critical attention hitherto bestowed on the *Crazy* movie, a sequel is already under production, forecasting the continuation of Asian American profitability.

Two, I use the commercial success of the *Crazy* movie as an incision point for this dissertation because, despite demonstrating great nuance and complexity, the reviews it generated largely fall on two ends of one spectrum. While some lampoon the movie's misrepresentation of the racial makeup and social stratification of Singapore in specific (and Asia by extension), others defend it for the fact that it offers representation of Asians on the big screen, period.⁹ In other words, both sides focus on evaluating the movie for its *representational* value, and disagree over the extent to which one needs to identify with the portrayal of Asia and the Asian characters. It is this insistence on evaluating Asian American cultural products by their representational merit that incentivized the writing of "Capitalizing Race." As I will demonstrate in each subsequent chapter, even as many Asian American critics and scholars eloquently argue for the necessity to redirect the

discipline of Asian American studies away from identity politics, writers and critics have found ways to turn public demands for representational diversity into actual economic and cultural capital for the collective Asian population both within and outside of the US borders. More importantly, the kind of cultural capital generated under the auspice of neoliberal multiculturalism tends to depend on and reproduce its logic, thus the uncritical celebration of visibility campaigns and its accruelement of cultural capital can be detrimental to the Asian diasporic community's effort to combat systemic racism and inequality.

From its inception, Asian American literature has had a contested relationship with cultural representation. Questions of how to faithfully represent a community created out of strategic essentialist contingencies, haunt the study of Asian American cultural and literary production, culminating in Frank Chin's much publicized critique of Maxine Hong Kingston's misrepresentation of Chinese culture in *The Women Warrior*. In his 1991 article "Come All Ye Asian American Writers of the Real and the Fake," Chin sets up the creative works of Kingston, Tan and Hwang as representatives of revisionary or "fake" Chinese cultural history). Since Chin's influential article, many Asian American scholars have pondered over the demand for the diasporic writers and artists to "represent" their ethnic culture in some "authentic" way.¹⁰ Lisa Lowe, most notably, "underscore[s] Asian American heterogeneities (particularly class, gender, and national differences among Asians) ... to negotiate with those modes of argumentation that continue to uphold a politics based on ethnic 'identity'" (28). While Lowe affirms "the Asian American necessity— politically, intellectually,

and personally—to organize, resist, and theorize as Asian Americans,” she also cautions against “a cultural politics that relies upon the construction of sameness and the exclusion of differences.” (28)

Indeed, since the 1965 lifting of anti-Asian immigration bans and the subsequent introduction of favorable US immigration laws designed to attract highly-skilled professionals¹¹, the makeup of the US Asian population has gone through tectonic shifts. On the one hand, a significant number of recent Asian immigrants are college-educated professionals from largely metropolitan or cosmopolitan areas in Asian countries. Statistics show that, Asian Americans lead all US ethnic groups in both educational level and average household income as of 2010.¹² On the other hand, however, recent US wars in Asia has also resulted in a growing population of refugees. Thus, even as Asians as a whole surpass other racial groups in measurable achievements, the “Asian” category itself is deeply stratified in terms of income, education, religion and politics. Finally, the majority of Asians living in the US are foreign-born and a significant number of them don’t have US citizenship.¹³ All this means that “Asian America” has been and continues to be a tenuous category, put under further strain by the rising number of multiracial individuals. The increasing transnationalization of the US Asian demographic in the last half of the 20th century coincided with the rise of Asian economies, both of which anticipated the adoption of neoliberal multiculturalist policies within the US nation-state. These developments shift the attention of Asian American literary studies from its earlier cultural nationalist concerns on representational authenticity vs. assimilation towards a more self-reflective engagement with the demands of the neoliberal literary and cultural market.

In *Race and Resistance* (2002), Viet Nguyen points to the flexible ways in which Asian American writers capitalize on their ethnicity to engage in what Yen Le Espiritu calls a “panethnic entrepreneurship.” The creation of the category of Asian American identity, Nguyen argues, coincides with “the maturation of a global capitalism that had the ability to turn even resistance into a commodity” (4). Asian American criticism, however, tends to reduce Asian American writing into an easy binary of “opposition to, or accommodation with, the various kinds of oppression that Asian Americans have had to endure,” without addressing the often “flexible strategies” Asian American writers deploy to gain economic rewards under the logic of multiculturalism (v). Both the neoliberal cooptation of Asian American pop culture and the economic rise of Asia put the study of Asian racialization in the US under further strain. Influenced by post-structuralism, Kandice Chuh’s *Imagine Otherwise* (2015) rejected the tendency to define Asian American literature narrowly by authorial identity and ethnic subject matter, calling instead for the discipline to adopt a “subjectless” discourse. In reimagining Asian American studies as a subjectless discipline, Chuh registers the need to redefine keywords such as “‘Oppression,’ ‘marginalization,’ and ‘resistance,’” “as ‘by whom’ and ‘against what’ are questions that are increasingly difficult to answer with certitude” (7).

This dissertation thus turns a critical eye towards the ways in which neoliberal multiculturalism underwrites the continued suturing together of “Asian America” as a pan-ethnic category of political representation in the current moment. Drawing upon these new discursive trends in the early aughts, Mark Chiang argues that, “Asian American cultural politics presumes a generalized subject of (material) lack, and that it aims at producing a theory of opposition predicated on a political ontology of lack” (

“Cultural Capital” 97). As Asian American studies attains legitimacy within the University as an institution since its earlier days, Chiang argues, it has become ill-equipped to theorize its own practice. This conflict between the subject (critics and academics) and object (the community) of Asian American Studies could be better resolved, Chiang suggests, within a framework that distinguishes between “political representation” and “cultural representation,” and between “political capital” and “cultural capital,” to use Pierre Bourdieu’s terminology. Reading the Asian American category as what Bourdieu calls a “field,” Chiang proposes to understand the objective of Asian American Studies to be the pursuit of “political capital of representation,” sealed within the neoliberal academic institution (13). “The primary tasks of ethnic studies,” Chiang observes, “has been to produce the theoretical mechanisms for converting political capital into cultural and academic capital” (14). Through analysis of recent popular literary publications, I expand upon Chiang’s discussions on the cultural capital of Asian American studies to illuminate more specifically how contemporary diasporic Asian writers negotiate with neoliberal multiculturalism under the condition of industrial globalization.

In addition, “Capitalizing Race” also dialogues with critical interventions in the social sciences that have sought to reframe the Asian American and Asian diasporic identity in relation to the proliferation of global capitalism. In *Flexible Citizenship*, Aihwa Ong argues that, “the contemporary practices and values of diasporan Chinese are characteristic of larger questions of displacement, travel, capital accumulation, and other transnational processes that affect large numbers of late-twentieth-century subjects (who are geographically “in place” and displaced)” (24). As Ong suggests, diasporic Asians

living in the US and elsewhere are “flexible citizens,” beneficiaries of cosmopolitan globalism enjoying greater transnational mobility due to their access to material and symbolic capital. In *Liquidated*, Karen Ho exposes Wall Street’s constructions of its hegemonic “global presence” that equates the flexibility of capital expansion with the liquidity of its labor force. Keywords generated from these works, such as “flexibility” and “liquidity,” has broad connotations that inform my literary analyses in this dissertation.

Through literary cultural analysis on a variety of novels published mostly in the past decade (with one exception) written by writers of Asian descent, such as Kevin Kwan, David Henry Hwang, Mohsin Hamid, and Chang-Rae Lee, I address the challenge of industrial globalization on diasporic identity by arguing that the rhetorical production of “ethnicity” is oftentimes an economic process, as economic interests get sublimated into cultural conflicts, and human mobility becomes contingent upon financial liquidity. Reading recent Asian diasporic literary texts in relation to neoliberal multiculturalism’s contradictory rhetoric and practice, I delve into the ways in which human mobility is dictated by, and sometimes troped as, financial liquidity in contemporary literature. Further, I argue that the literature under discussion in this dissertation draws upon and contributes to the formation of a racialized global economic *habitus*. Building upon the critical developments in the late nineties and early aughts in both Asian American literary and cultural studies and social sciences, I argue that contemporary Asian diasporic authors capitalize on their “epidermal otherness” to engage, and indeed delineate, a pan-ethnic diasporic readership. Teasing out the complex ways in which these authors contend with the kind of flexible cultural and political capital accumulation, governed by

a racialized cultural and economic *habitus*, I demonstrate that, rather than simply launching a resistance to the capitalist hegemony of the Global North, contemporary Asian diasporic writers have taken a more ambivalent approach towards capital.

Chapter two argues that Kevin Kwan's *Crazy Rich Asians* trilogy represents a new type of "Asian pride porn" that champions Asian economic ascension as the ultimate means of achieving (post)racial equality. Characterized by a rhetorical conflation of free market exchange with individual freedom, this aspirational fantasy of the Asian American middle class's introduction to Singaporean high society simultaneously satirizes and capitalizes on the terms of cultural citizenship within global industrial capitalism through deploying multiculturalist rhetorics that rely on Asian American exceptionalism for "racial uplift." The series thus does little to critique neoliberal capitalism, even as they replace stereotypes of poverty and political turmoil with ones of hedonism and opulence. The success of the recent filmic adaptation of the first volume of the trilogy demonstrates the potential of such neoliberal narratives in promoting more flexible ethnic alliances among transnational communities. However, the discourse of "Asian racial uplift" in these narratives potentially do symbolic harm by naturalizing global structural inequities/occluding conditions and histories of domination.

In chapter three, I read David Henry Hwang's plays *Yellow Face* (2007) and *Chinglish* (2011) as examples of what Russian cultural theorist Mikhail Epstein calls "transcultural" texts, i.e., texts that transcends fixed linguistic and identity boundaries. While *Yellow Face* toys with the idea of transracial identification as an antidote to multiculturalism's lip service to "diversity", *Chinglish* harks towards the transcendence of language itself in imagining greater cross-cultural understanding. Together, these texts

illustrate Hwang's more recent political project of flexible transnational belongings. Hwang's literary "transcultural" imaginaries, I argue, are ultimately driven by the expansion of global market economy, and therefore still complies with its neoliberal principles. In setting up Hwang's works as "transcultural" texts, I take note of both the possibilities and constraints of Epstein's utopic transculturalism, which he envisions as a third alternative to globalism and multiculturalism.

Chapter four reads two novels by the Pakistani British writer Mohsin Hamid - *How to Get Filthy Rich in Rising Asia* (2013) and *Exit West* (2017) - as postmodern fables of the contemporary migratory experience in response to financial exploitation and existential precarity in the Global South. My readings are informed by anthropologist Marc Augé's concept of the "non-place," which describes a space that is not relational, historical, nor concerned with identity, such as taxis, hotels, airports, or refugee camps. The spread of neoliberal economy has driven the proliferation of non-places, the ubiquity of which has fundamentally changed human's experience of places, from a relation grounded in the familiarity of the local to one superseded by the uncanny recognition-without-identification that typify our modern experience of globality. In this chapter, I use the idea of "non-place" as a theoretical frame to rethink both current geopolitical theories of migration and the nation-state, as well as to reexamine the locality-based logic of identity politics. Set in the "non-place" of anonymous metropolises penetrated by neoliberal technologies, such as advertisements, social media and electronic surveillance, Hamid's novels imagine new opportunities for place-making under these inhuman conditions.

By way of conclusion, the final chapter rounds up the discussion by returning to

an earlier period of Asian American literature. Taking a closer look at the Asian American classic, Chang-Rae Lee's *Native Speaker* (1995), I argue that, in fashioning his neo-American characters as deviant economic agents employing their own racial capital to the detriment of their ethnic communities, Lee critiques the neoliberal logic of assimilation that perpetuates an unjust racial and economic status quo. Despite this insight, I argue, Lee's successful career as a Korean American novelist is nonetheless in part due to the management of his own cultural and racial otherness as a form of capital.

In *Undoing the Demos*, Wendy Brown argues that neoliberalism, more than an economic ideology, has become "a normative order of reason developed over three decades into a widely and deeply disseminated governing rationality," that "transmogrifies every human domain and endeavor, along with humans themselves, according to a specific image of the economic" (9-10). This dissertation looks at one of the many consequences of the globalized rule of ecomium, in specific, the neoliberalization of Asian American racial formation. In reading contemporary popular literature, "Capitalizing Race" explores the ways in which Asian American literature produced by the neoliberal literary market participates in the formation of an imagined global citizenship based on the consumption of ethnic literature and culture. Noting the increasing neoliberal cooptation of Asian American Literature in the service to economic globalization, my dissertation takes a closer look at neoliberal multiculturalism as a dominant ideology underwriting current discursive trends such as flexible citizenship, the model minority discourse, "transculturalism," "transracialism" and so on. In coining new terminologies such as "Asian racial uplift," "Asian pride porn," "diasporic ventriloquism," "diasporic non-place" etc., this dissertation creates new interdisciplinary

models for research across disparate fields of Asian American Studies, Sinophone Studies and Global Asian Studies.

Chapter II

“Asian Pride Porn”: Neoliberal Multiculturalism and the Narrative of Asian Racial

Uplift in Kevin Kwan’s *Crazy Rich Asians* Trilogy

I. Introduction

Kevin Kwan’s *New York Times* bestselling novel, *Crazy Rich Asians* (2013), first volume of a trilogy that includes *China Rich Girlfriend* (2015) and *Rich People Problems* (2017), returned to the limelight upon the release of its Hollywood adaptation in 2018, directed by Jon M. Chu. The movie, the first Hollywood production in 25 years to feature an all-Asian cast since Wayne Wang’s 1993 “The Joy Luck Club,” has been hailed as a watershed moment for Asian American representation in mainstream US media.¹⁴ The plot of the movie is a relatively simple one: a tale of the interclass romance between Nick Young, heir apparent to one of Singapore’s biggest fortunes, and Rachel Chu, born to a first generation Chinese American single mother, who has a stereotypically “immigrant bootstrap” backstory. The narrative tension of the movie, as with the first novel, is centered on the intrusion of the Asian American middle class onto the society of Asia’s uber-wealthy. What is unique about the *Crazy* franchise, some has argued, lies in its departure from the familiar “model minority” trope commonly associated with Asian American representation in US media. Despite featuring two overachieving young Asian professors as protagonists, the series also creates new archetypes such as “Hennessy-swirling, cigar-puffing fat-cat Asian tycoons; fortune-hunting ‘Taiwanese tornadoes’; Hong Kong fashionista men (‘dandies in the truest sense of the word’), ... Chuppies (Chinese yuppies); Henwees (high-net worth individuals)”, most of whom conversant in posh Queen’s English, mixed with slangs in Malay, Cantonese and Hokkien dialects

(Park, “Crazy Rich Asians”). Taking issue with the image of the Asian diasporic as either “fresh off the boat” stoic immigrants or rule-abiding model minority, Kwan depicts instead profligate, hedonistic, flexible citizens, whose global citizenship is firmly secured through consumption.

On the surface, the *Crazy* series typifies the “wealth porn”¹⁵ or “lifestyle porn” genre, writings fictional or journalistic, depicting the lavish lifestyles of the wealthy to titillate the envious imagination of its readership. Unlike works of fiction that typically fall into this category, over-represented in recent commercial successes from the *Fifty Shades* series to HBO’s recent hit, “Big Little Lies,” the *Crazy Rich Asians* series’ focus on Asia “offers refreshing nouveau voyeurism to readers who long ago burned out on American and English aspirational fantasies,” writes Janet Maslin in a review¹⁶ for the *New York Times* (Maslin, 2013). Instead of “wealth porn,” I would argue that the *Crazy* series should more accurately be characterized as “pride porn,” specifically, “Asian pride porn,” after the title of Greg Pak’s 2000 short film that pokes fun of the porn industry’s Asian-obsession. A facetious 3-minute spoof trailer, the film features a straight-faced David Henry Hwang, extoling the virtues of the new “Asian Pride Porn,” touting its “positive images of confident Asian American men and women caught on tape, in the hottest, hardcore action currently illegal in North America.”¹⁷ Like Pak’s film, *Crazy Rich Asians* is also a genre-bending experiment that aims to combat stereotypes and assert a sense of ethnic pride. “Don’t you know there are children starving in America?” exclaims a wealthy Singaporean grandmother, as she urges her granddaughters to finish their plates (*Crazy* 138). Yet, whereas Pak’s film quips the porn industry’s obsession with Asian sexuality by featuring a fully clad cast engaged in nothing more than satirically

conscientious conversations about the porn genre itself, the *Crazy* trilogy's popularity is unmistakably buoyed by the rampant materialism it purports to satirize.

While generally met with rave reviews in the US, the movie elicited criticism from transnational reviewer like Sangeetha Thanapal¹⁸, Hannah Ellis-Petersen and Lily Kuo,¹⁹ all of whom rightly point out its lack of representational heterogeneity, as well as its uncritical replication of neocolonial racial hierarchies within the Singaporean society. While some question the prima facie equation of the film's popularity and commercial success to a victory for Asian American representation, many renowned critics in Asian American Studies, such as Viet Nguyen²⁰ and Hua Hsu²¹, have defended the film's representational merit within the frame of US racial politics. Nguyen, for example, points out the right of Asian Americans to experience a form of "narrative plentitude," even, or rather especially, in various forms of aesthetic mediocrity. Similarly, Hsu argues for the necessity of having rounded and diverse representations of Asians on the big screen, which he considers the true end point of representational equality. This chapter steers clear of the representational debates, which stems from a long discussion over identity politics in Asian American studies.

Despite the polarizing takes on its representational politics, it is indisputable that the *Crazy Rich Asians* film, as with the original novel series, succeeds in converting the capital accumulation of Singapore and China into collective cultural and symbolic capital of the Asian diaspora, which in turn opens the door for greater and more varied Asian American representations in US popular culture. In recent years, scholars have slowly come to a consensus over the increasing complicity of Asian American literary studies in the neoliberal institution of the university, and have become more aware of the

transformation of racial identities into forms of cultural and symbolic capital.²² In addition to stereotyping the Asian American community, the model minority discourse of the 90s collaborates with neoliberal post-racial discourses of the subsequent decades to perpetuate systemic injustice against Latinx, Black and Native populations. Situating the success of the *Crazy* franchise in the intersection of the neoliberal multiculturalist US cultural marketplace and Singaporean postcolonial modernity, I hope to illuminate the complex ways in which neoliberal narratives of global Asian capital manages the Asian American community's claim to social and cultural citizenship within the US nation-state.

As Pamela Thoma observes, "it is through engagement with commercial media culture that Americans come to see themselves (or not) as enfranchised national citizens." ("Negotiating" [6]) As both a political economic system and a social philosophy, Thoma goes on, neoliberalism manages the "cultural expression of citizenship claims through intensifying subjects' allegiances to communities, including racial and ethnic communities." ("Negotiating" [12]) The *Crazy Rich Asians* film's impressive box office success, as well as the sheer volume and caliber of the responses mobilized by this otherwise middle-brow romantic comedy, is itself a testament to the success of neoliberal multiculturalist representational politics in creating and commercializing racial and cultural belonging. The mixed reception of the movie, however, prompts a closer look at Kevin Kwan's original book series, which has also won impressive commercial success, and even some critical acclaim.²³ It is my contention that Kwan strategically deploys neoliberal multiculturalist rhetorics, characterized by the rhetorical conflation of financial success with racial equality, to

reimagine Asian American cultural citizenship and romanticize the Asian diaspora with the rationale of global capitalism. Capitalizing on the diasporic Asian racial and cultural identity, the *Crazy* series typifies a narrative of globalized “Asian racial uplift”. Similar to the narratives of African American racial uplift in the first half of the 20th century that, among other things, highlighted the elite status of a few in an effort to reimagine and reform the collective behavior of the whole, the *Crazy* trilogy likewise revamps the image of Asia from one plagued by poverty and political turmoil to one characterized by hedonism and opulence, heralding the decline of the European colonial powers. If the African American racial uplift movement unintentionally replicated anti-black stereotypes and exacerbated internal class divisions within the African American community, so the discourse of Asian racial uplift replicates neocolonial racial and class hierarchies, thus sidestepping (if not rationalizing) the continued exploitation and dispossession of the Asian and Asian diasporic communities under global capitalism. Further, in simultaneously satirizing and capitalizing on the Europhilia and rampant consumerism of his crazy rich characters, Kwan creates a Sinophone identity buttressed by consumption of European cultural and consumer products. And in championing Asian economic ascension, the trilogy attributes the increasing economic and cultural mobility of transnational Asians to the unimpeded flow of global capital.

My critique of the series as a form of “Asian pride porn,” characterized by a neoliberal racial uplift narrative, departs from the model of Asian American literary criticism that either celebrate the symbolic capital of Asianness under the auspice of multiculturalist initiatives in the neoliberal institution or read such neoliberal narratives as a continuation of the US model minority discourse. Without denying the importance of

representational debates, a topic much expanded on in Asian American studies, my reading of the *Crazy* series as “Asian pride porn” takes a critical look at the recent rise of Asian American representation in US popular in relation to both the escalation of neoliberal discourses in the US and the changing dynamics of the postcolonial global order. Instead of taking for granted the oppositional stance of Asian American literature vis-a-vis mainstream US cultural production, my reading of the *Crazy* trilogy as “Asian pride porn” demonstrates the effectiveness of a globalized neoliberal discourse in reimagining Asian American cultural citizenship, for better or for worse. My reading of the *Crazy* series is indebted to Grace Hong’s analysis of the series as a globalized instantiation of the Model Minority discourse, which “trades on a fetishization of mobility, associating Asian diasporic populations with Asian capital as entities to be courted and as proof of the benefits of Western- style capitalism” (“Speculative” 112). While Hong sees the *Crazy* series’ troping of the flexible Asian diasporic as an extension of the US Model Minority discourse, a continuous preoccupation within Asian American studies since the 1980s, my reading stresses the series’ distinct departure from such US-centric trope.

II. Neoliberal Multiculturalism

The Asian diasporics in Kwan’s novels are ideal consumers, whose cosmopolitan status is maintained through the consumption of European, and very occasionally American, luxury goods. For example, the shopaholic heiress Astrid Leong’s impeccably eclectic and unassuming fashion sense wins the hearts of both the series’ snobby characters and its readers. Seen frequently in luxury designer gowns costing more than someone’s priced car, Astrid is reputed to be the only one who “could get away with

wearing a simple linen dress to a ball” (77). The dress in question, as one might have guessed, turns out to be “an original Madame Grès” (77)! The characterization of Astrid exemplifies the neoliberal aesthetic that imbues beauty onto wealth as well as Kwan’s logic of racial uplift through consumption. During a romantic getaway in Paris in the mid 1990s, Astrid’s then teenage boyfriend, Charlie Wu, takes her shopping at an exclusive designer boutique. Astrid’s first encounter with European *haute couture* is greeted with the cold shoulders of a snobby shop assistant, prompting Charlie to pull strings through his father’s bank, eventually getting the boutique owner to personally supervise her dress fitting. To further teach the shop assistant a lesson in humility, Charlie instructs Astrid to pick out “at least ten dresses”, as he explains, his “father always says, the only way to get these ang mor gau sai²⁴ to respect you is to smack them in the face with your dua lan chiao*money until they get on their knees” (698 *Crazy*).²⁵ This scenario is exemplary of the neoliberal logic underpinning Kwan’s project: racial equality is achievable and seemingly only achievable through unimpeded free market competition. Prioritizing the site of consumption over the site of production of European luxury goods, however, Kwan’s characters imagine material consumption as means toward gaining racial equality. The underlying irony, of course, is that the site of production of the western garment industry is usually in the Global South, particularly in Asia, due to the low cost of labor and loose environmental regulations. In addition to labor exploitation and devastating pollution, the outsourcing of western textile industry is responsible for creating some of the earliest generations of nouveau riche in countries such as China, Indonesia, Bangladesh, etc. Thus, the neoliberal rhetoric employed in the *Crazy* series distracts from the demands for labor equality and environmental justice. In focusing on

the borderless existence of a few wealthy individuals, the series celebrates a version of free market justice that masks the systemic racial and economic inequalities underpinning global capitalist expansion.

In the post-civil rights political moment, the enthusiasm towards state-managed multiculturalism starts to reconfigure the cultural status of US ethnic minorities.

Shedding the stigma of clannishness, Asian Americans have slowly emerged as the token multicultural American subject. In “The Spirit of Neoliberalism,” Melamed argues that “Neoliberal policy engenders new racial subjects, as it creates and distinguishes between newly privileged and stigmatized collectivities, yet multiculturalism codes the wealth, mobility, and political power of neoliberalism’s beneficiaries to be the just desserts of ‘multicultural world citizens,’ while representing those neoliberalism dispossesses to be handicapped by their own ‘monoculturalism’ or other historico-cultural deficiencies” (1).

In the *Crazy* series, white characters often serve as the antithesis of the neoliberal multiculturalist ideals, their monoculturalism manifesting in blatant racism. The wealthy Asian characters, on the other hand, are default “multicultural” subjects due to the juxtaposition of their ethnicity and their cosmopolitan consumption patterns. They are also primed as deserving neoliberal subjects on account of their wealth. The white peripheral characters, in contrast, are coded as white and monocultural, therefore deserving punishment, often in economic form. Take, for example, the prologue to *Crazy Rich Asians*. The series’ first volume opens with two Singaporean Chinese heiresses and their young children seeking shelter at the Calthorpe, a luxury hotel in 1986 London. Despite having a reservation for the largest suite in the establishment, the families were denied accommodation by a snooty concierge, comically named Ormsby, out of concern

for the “Dowager Marchioness of Uckfield,” who must be spared “these foreigners” at the breakfast table. In response to this blatant discrimination, Felicity Leong, wife of business tycoon and golf buddy of the aristocratic owner of the Calthorpe, Harry Leong, pulls strings and purchases it. The deliriously cathartic moment came when an incredulous Ormsby is informed of the hotel’s change of ownership and his immediate dismissal. This opening effectively aligns neoliberal principles with multiculturalist discourses of equality: racial justice is doled out through the indiscriminating hand of “free” trade. Given the hotel’s long aristocratic ownership, the transfer of power amounts to a symbolic transfer of empires. This opening scene firmly aligns readerly sympathy with the series’ wealthy Asian characters, who end up occupying the moral high ground as the underdog, despite their class privilege. Indeed, the defeat of the snooty white concierge symbolizes the defeat of the Western oppressor, although the true victory lies in the celebration of hard cold cash as an indiscriminate equalizer of power. In the act of purchasing the hotel and expelling its racist employee, Felicity Leong is able to manipulate the lever of global capitalism to right the historic wrong dealt Asians everywhere, particularly the historic wrong of British colonialism on Singapore. The irony, however, is that these rhetorical encounters between Asian and white characters all feature the former as consumer and the latter as provider of service or producer of merchandise, when in reality the relationship is often the reverse. Therefore, Kwan’s narrative of Asian racial uplift through consumption actually obscures the inherent disadvantages of the global south in the process of economic globalization.

Relying on the rhetorical sleight of hand that equates “free market” with “freedom”, Kwan replicates the narrative of Asian Exceptionalism that seals their status

as global model minorities under the discourse of multiculturalism contained within the Singaporean nationalist framework. In multiple other encounters between the racist white characters and the wealthy Asians, the latter emerges triumphant through pure meritocratic competition, enacting the often self-fulfilling revenge fantasies of (post)racial equality. Just as the suturing of state-sanctioned anti-racist discourse onto American nationalism obscures systemic racism, so a narrative of pan-Asian cosmopolitanism fueled by excessive material consumption creates the illusion of equal opportunity under global capitalism, obscuring the actual wealth disparity between the Global North and the Global South, as well as the racialized exploitation of the latter.

Although the series satirizes the fatuous extravagance of its wealthy characters, it also blithely condones the system of exploitation from which they profit. Take, for example, Rachel's friend Peik Lin on the relative merit of conspicuous consumption:

"To someone living in a mud hut somewhere, isn't the \$200 you paid for those Rag & Bone jeans you're wearing considered obscene? ... My mother wanted an exact re-creation on her bedroom ceiling of a Baroque fresco she saw at some palace in Germany. It cost her half a million dollars, but two artists from the Czech Republic worked on it every day for three months. One guy was able to buy and furnish a new house in Prague, while the other one sent his kid to Penn State. We all choose to spend our money in different ways, but at least we get to make that choice. Just think—twenty years ago, these girls you went to Paris with would only have two choices: Do you want your Mao jacket in shit brown or shit gray?" (*China* 1041)

To Peik Lin, a Sanford grad and daughter of a self-made Singaporean real estate tycoon,

spending a half million dollars on a fresco isn't obscene, since the imagined poor, but talented, European artist and his family are more than fairly compensated. Even if this is true, there is a false equivalence between a \$200 pair of jeans and a half-million-dollar fresco, the former resulting from global industrial manufacturing that thrives on the exploitation of laborers in the global south, whereas the latter an afterimage of an idyllic European artisan economy. In the age of globalization, Asian economic ascension is bolstered not by its artisan craftwork, but by becoming the home base to global industrial manufacturing. Rather than supporting skilled craftsmanship, transnational economy profits at the disadvantage of the unskilled laborer, on an industrial scale. This is an aspect of the Asian economic "miracle" that the speaker, and by extension the author himself, blissfully ignores. Finally, in typical *Crazy Rich* fashion, the point of Peik Lin's argument rests squarely on an unabashed endorsement of the free market: "We all choose to spend our money in different ways, but at least we get to make that choice" (1041). In typical neoliberal logic, free market is equated to individual freedom, whereas Marxist demands for equality is reduced to a deprivation of individual choices, in terms of fashion accessories, no less.

III. Time, Objects, and Cultural Capital in *Nouveau Riche* Narratives

In addition to deploying principles of neoliberal multiculturalism, Kwan's narrative of racial uplift functions by turning monetary capital into cultural capital, particularly the type of cultural capital that replicates Euroamerican cultural dominance and its often orientalist rhetoric. In *Crazy* series, the upper class's preservation of cultural capital lies in the acquisition of historicity as manifested in the fascination and painstaking curation of family lineage. Just as Asian American immigrants' obsession with generation-

counting reflects the degree of “nativeness” as a cultural or social capital in the pursuit of the American Dream, the family diagrams at the beginning of each volume in the *Crazy* trilogy suggest a similar impulse to acquire cultural capital through curating history and limiting its accessibility. In the universe of the *Crazy* trilogy, the original sin of the new money lies in its newness, and history is the hottest commodity that money can(not) buy. In this section, I read Kwan’s complex description and prescription of cultural capital, coded both in objects and in the elusive “taste,” as a reflection of European colonial legacy.

As Corinna Ko-Tung, a professional consultant who makes a career out of her social connections, lays bare for her client, Kitty Pong:

For the crowd you seek to impress, your money means nothing. Especially these days, when twentysomething Mainlanders have burst onto the scene with billions apiece, the old guard have resorted to new ways of stratifying themselves. What matters more than ever now are bloodlines and when your family first made its money. Which province of China did your family originate from? Which dialect group? Were they part of the tightly knit Chiu-Chow clans, or the Shanghai émigré class? Are you second-, third-, or fourth-generation rich? And how was the fortune made? Was it in textiles or property (pre-Li Ka-Shing or post-1997)? Every minute detail matters. For instance, you can have ten billion dollars but still be considered nothing more than a speck of dirt by the Keungs, who are down to their last hundred million but can trace their lineage to the Duke of Yansheng.*” (399-400 *China*)

This passage exposes how “history” is co-opted by the Singaporean upper class to preserve their privilege, or social capital. The term “old guard,” referring to a handful of Hong Kong families whose wealth dates back generations, illustrates the fetishization of history and an anxiety over upward mobility by Hong Kong and Singaporean societies alike. Despite their staggering wealth, *nouveau riche* like Kitty, a former Mainland B film actress turned trophy wife, can’t enjoy the true privilege of high society, until she has acquired the patina of old wealth. The fact that Corinna can turn her social and familial connections into a profitable enterprise is itself an example of how social and cultural capital converts into actual capital. Conversely, the improvement of her clients’ “taste” allows them quick accumulation of cultural capital, and fast track entrance into high society. The passage also demonstrates the history of accumulation and conversion among various forms of capitals: the first generation’s initial infusion of capital trickles down to the second generation not only in the form of material wealth, but also in the social capital of education and connections, which is then converted into and passed on through the cultural capital of “taste.” It is the often Eurocentric definition of “taste” that is of particular interest to my critique of the series.

Since the value of cultural capital lies in its scarcity, the accumulation of cultural capital also necessitates its exclusion from others. In the *Crazy* trilogy, the rhetoric of taste, displayed particularly through consumption patterns, is invoked by the Singaporean “old guards” to exclude the *nouveau riche* Chinese from accessing cultural capital. More than the anxiety over new money, the series’ painstaking prescription of good vs. bad tastes further illustrates the double anxiety of the Singaporean establishment, and its diasporic subjects such as Kwan, over both its own relatively new wealth and the

indelible legacy of colonialism. On the one hand, the series' satirical fervor is directed largely at mainland Chinese consumers whose relentless flaunting of wealth through flashy display of luxury goods betray their lack of "taste." In controlling the narrative of good vs bad taste, the old money poses certain limits to the newcomer's ability to accumulate cultural and symbolic capital. Due to the massive wealth accumulated during colonialism, Europe has had the privilege of defining the discourse on "taste," a process through which the legacies of colonialism still circulates today. According to Benjamin Smith, the Global North has struggled to grapple with world-wide geo-economic changes accompanying the rise of Asia, and mainstream cultural and literary narratives on nouveau riche territories tend to "focus on attaching imagery and narrative to economic change, quite often by drawing on well-established axes that divide 'goodness' from 'badness', such as race, gender, and class" (566). He goes on to expostulate "the important role that objects played in trying to distinguish nouveau riche territories from established ones" (568). Using the Cadillac as an example, Smith demonstrates how the anxiety-laden western scholarly and lay narratives both employ the luxury consumer item as a trope for "bad taste," thus effectively limiting the symbolic capital Cadillac ownership confers upon nouveau riche oil states like Saudi Arabia. Writing on "oil states" of the Gulf, Benjamin Smith points out that the Global North tend to frame nouveau riche territories as the "unsuccessful success," whose wealth is "unearned and often mismanaged" (567). The Singapore under Kwan's depiction exhibits similar class-consciousness, as the nouveaux riches is advised to acquaint themselves with the ways of the Euroamerican "old money".

In the *Crazy* series, the detailed guideline introducing the nouveau riche to “proper” taste is itself an evidence of Euroamerican dominance of cultural capital. For Kitty Pong to rid herself of her sordid past in the porn industry, for example, Corinna prescribed a long list of instructions not only aimed at revamping her flashy wardrobe, but more importantly her “conversation skills” through reading. Among the almost entirely English language and British-dominant works are:

“Jane Austen—complete works beginning with *Pride and Prejudice*

Edith Wharton—*The Custom of the Country*, *The Age of Innocence*, *The Buccaneers*, *The House of Mirth* (must be read in strict order—you will understand why when you finish the last one)

Vanity Fair by William Makepeace Thackeray

Anna Karenina by Leo Tolstoy

Brideshead Revisited by Evelyn Waugh

Anthony Trollope—all the books in the Palliser series, beginning with *Can You Forgive Her?*” (*China* 435)

It’s not totally surprising that every social upstart should read works by Austin, Wharton, Thackeray and Trollop, whose novels are themselves part documentations and part instructions for the social climbers of their time. In fact, many of these works can be read as 19th century versions of wealth porn, offering middle class readers a glimpse of the gilded lives of the landed gentry. In evoking these texts, Kwan aligns the *Crazy* series with the 19th century romantic novel tradition, which arises alongside the Industrial Revolution and the rise of the middle class. For my purpose, I read the overwhelming presence of British authors in the list as an illustration of the cultural legacy of British

colonialism on Singaporean society, and the neocolonial logic of Kwan's racial uplift narrative.

In *Undoing the Demos*, Wendy Brown argues that neoliberalism, more than an economic ideology, has become “a normative order of reason developed over three decades into a widely and deeply disseminated governing rationality,” that “transmogrifies every human domain and endeavor, along with humans themselves, according to a specific image of the economic” (9-10). Although the “old guards” would prefer that history remain the one thing that can't be purchased, it is very much for sale. It is clear throughout the narrative that cultural capital is acquired largely through the consumption of the right kinds of objects: that is, European ones. While relics from Asia carry great value, they're valued mainly as vessels of history, such as a Ming vase, or the much sought-after antique scroll, “Palace of Eighteen Perfections.” Although cultural capital can be accrued through obtaining these “Orientalia,” Western culture confers value in more abstract and symbolic forms, in the acquisition of a posh British accent, a British education, royal titles, and knowledge of Classical western music, etc. In *Flexible Citizenship*, Ong expostulates the various ways racial identity poses a glass ceiling to the Asian émigré's “flexible accumulation” of cultural and symbolic capital in the Global North. That is, in the world of strategic accumulation of different forms of capitals, the Asian diasporan must be flexible in their acquisition of symbolic capital, as “Euroamerican cultural hegemony determines and judges the signs and forms of metropolitan status and glamour” (89). Such is the insidious cultural and economic legacy of colonial domination that the *Crazy* series fails to critique.

Rather than a simple manifestation of Asian ancestral worship, the series'

emphasis on lineage, indicated in the elaborate family diagram at the beginning of each volume, prescribes the proper passage of wealth. It is no surprise therefore, that the generations prior to the wealth acquisition are not mentioned in the family map, just as Singaporean history prior to British colonization is written over. The new money's ability to purchase antique art, colonial houses and a fancy education, all indicates the possibility to purchase history. As we see repeatedly in *China Rich Girlfriend*, when it comes to conspicuous consumption in the antique market, history is the ultimate commodity. Kitty Pong, for example, pays way above estimate for "the Palace of Eighteen Perfections," a set of silk scrolls depicting an eighth century Chinese royal retreat belonging to the Qing imperial collection, not out of appreciation for the art, nor some noble sense of patriotism or historic justice,²⁶ but to gain entrance into Hong Kong's high society.

However the utmost luxury, hidden from the uninitiated, is the ability to buy oneself out of history. Astrid, for example, has never appeared in society magazines, thanks to a blanket deal her parents made with all the presses in Singapore when she reached her teens. At a time when the nouveau rich is desperate to get their names and faces in the press, the "old money" has quietly written themselves out of history so as to safeguard their extravagant lifestyle with impunity. If there is one thing about the Asian jet set that the *Crazy* trilogy whole-heartedly satirizes, it is the distasteful flaunting of wealth. Whereas the *nouveau riche* gleefully flaunts their brand new fortune, the "old money" quietly demonstrates its superiority in claiming timelessness. Once and again, Astrid, the "ravishingly beautiful and faultlessly elegant" "double heiress," casually reveals the origins of her museum-grade antique jewels to the dismay of her admirers (*China* xii). One bracelet, we're told, is real Etruscan "made in 650BC," not a replica

from the designers at Lalaounis (China 872). The lack of flaunting, it would appear, is the ultimate flaunting.

Perhaps the best example of the trilogy's commodification of history is in the final sale of Tyersall Park, the legendary Shang family estate. This much-coveted property literally emanates "this sense of being in an enchanted time warp the moment [one] passed through the front door" (*China* 176). The "perfect patina of age that no amount of money can buy" is taken as an indicator of the owner's true class, something not to be imitated by the less cultivated moneyed crowd (*Rich* 385). Upon the passing of Shang Suyi, the old estate, whose ownership is compared by some to "owning Central Park in New York," is sold to a group led by no other than Nick Young, Suyi's favorite grandson and one of the biggest beneficiaries of the sale. After having the house declared a "national historic landmark," Nick manages to buy it from under the Mainland Chinese mogul intent on converting it into a luxury home for his daughter. Under the new stewardship of Nick and friends, the main house will be turned into a national museum, with the wings converted into a private hotel and event venue. The servant quarters, to the delight of some and dismay of others, will be turned into affordable public housing. In typical feel-good romantic comedy fashion, the ending to the *Crazy* trilogy is the crown jewel of the cornucopia of uplifting narrative tidbits: the country benefits from patriots like Nick, who is devoted to the preservation of its history and the service of its common people; the extended Shang and Young family members receive an incredible lump sum payment; and most importantly, the sale of the house absolves Nick from further obligations to his family and to Singapore, allowing him the freedom to pursue a truly transnational lifestyle.

IV. Sinophone Pan-ethnicity and Flexible Citizenship

The title of the *Crazy* series' first volume, "Crazy Rich *Asians*," signals a Pan-Asian identity that supplants the nation-state in representing a collective identity. This is largely achieved through the consistent use of the Sinophone languages (Mandarin, Cantonese, and Hokkien) by characters from different countries, including Asian Americans. For example, one of the most common epithets evoked throughout the narrative is "ang mor," short for "ang mor gau sai," a Hokkien racial slur for white people that literally translates to "red-haired (ang mor) dog shit (gau sai)" (*Crazy* 6). Despite its incendiary literal meaning, "ang mor" is most often deployed humorously, to ridicule a particular type of Euroamerican snide, as in: "[Eleanor] had always found Asian girls with American accents to be quite ridiculous. They all sounded like they were faking it, trying to sound so ang mor" (*Crazy* 108). The humor with which the term is invoked renders it less offensive, while providing vicarious vindication to the series' Asian readers, most of whom are not strangers to racialized verbal insults. In addition to the strategic use of Sinophone languages, the series fosters a sense of diasporic Asian solidarity by validating pidgin English. The footnote for "gahmen," for instance, simply reads: "Correct Singlish pronunciation for 'government'" (*China* 1002). The deployment of both Sinophone and "Singlish" (Singaporean English) phrases throughout the series contributes to Kwan's project of Asian racial uplift through the affirmation of multiculturalism.

Shumei Shih defines the "Sinophone" as "a network of places of cultural production outside China and on the margins of China and Chineseness, where a historical process of heterogenizing and localizing of continental Chinese culture has

been taking place for several centuries” (*Visuality* 4). Whereas ethnicity is a fixed social construct, observes Etienne Balibar, a linguistic identity results in a “community in the present,” which sustains an illusion of having “always existed, but lays down no destiny for the successive generations” (98–99). Echoing Balibar, Shih argues for linguistic commonalities as an alternative organizing principle for collective belonging. Whereas monolingualism of the national language is a form of nationalism that is “deterministic, atavistic, and philosophically weak, foreclosing present and future potentialities,” Shih observes, the Sinophone is a heteroglossia of possibilities (“The Concept of the Sinophone” 716). Thus, Shih suggests replacing the term “overseas Chinese” or “diasporic Chinese” with the term “Sinophone” to designate Sinic language speakers living around the world. Given the charged history of continental colonialism by the Han ethnic Chinese in Asia and the cultural nationalist policies of the PRC, substituting “Chinese” with “Sinophone” offers a more democratic possibility for pan-ethnic community building. Unlike “diaspora” that connote dislocation and dispossession, the Sinophone is more “placid,” pointing towards “a linguistic present and future without destiny” (“The Concept of the Sinophone” 716).

According to Shih, the Sinophone is a “placid” identity that adapts and transforms itself according to the locale in which it is produced. In other words, it “announces the expiration date of diaspora wherever diaspora is taken as value; it eschews monolingualism, ethnocentrism, and colonialism; it evinces the existential openness and porousness of linguistic communities; and it aims for the concrete universal” (“The Concept of the Sinophone” 717). The concept of the Sinophone thus challenges the cultural nationalist emphasis in the field of Asian American Studies, galvanized by the

polemics between assimilation and cultural preservation, and exercised in demands for citizenship and civil rights.

More than a socio-linguistic category, however, the Sinophone in the *Crazy* series is also a complex network of cultural and ethnic relationships. According to Ong, the triumph of “Chinese capitalism” heralds the emergence of a new “Chinese subject” in global capitalism, and “produce[s] concepts such as ‘fraternal network capitalism’ and ‘Greater China,’ a term that refers to the economically integrated zone comprising China, Taiwan, and Hong Kong, but sometimes includes the ethnic Chinese communities in Southeast Asia,” such as those in Thailand and Indonesia (7). Referring to themselves as “Chinese,” Kwan’s wealthy Singaporeans are representative of this new Chinese subject, whose claim of ethnic status allows them access to “circuits of production, trade, and finance” within the “regional business networks” within global capitalism.

The accolades that the *Crazy* series garners is in no small part due to the allure of the cultural “flexibility” of its Sinophone characters, whose self-assured cosmopolitanism challenges the stereotype of the Asian diasporan. The first generation resident in the US, protagonist Nick Young, for instance, is not your typical FOB. In addition to his classic good looks and refined taste, his British accent is a source of constant amazement and amusement to his American friends. Upon their first meeting, Rachel is pleasantly surprised by the differences between Nick and the typical Asian American men she boycotts as potential partners, men who “not so subtly flaunted his own SAT stats—how many generations his family had been in America; what kind of doctors his parents were; ... and the approximate number of years before he became (pick one) chief executive officer, chief financial officer, chief technology officer, chief law partner, or chief

surgeon,” all while judging Asian American women with superficial and skewed standards (Crazy 159-60). Unlike these men, characterized as extreme model minorities, Nick represents a new type of global citizen, a flexible citizen whose exotic cultural background and ambiguous citizenship status only enhances his enjoyment of a transnational lifestyle. “Flexible citizenship,” as Ong defines it, is “the cultural logics of capitalist accumulation, travel, and displacement that induce subjects to respond fluidly and opportunistically to changing political-economic conditions” (6). In addition to Nick Young, multiple other characters in the series obtain foreign residences for both political and cultural reasons. Edison Cheng, for example, secures Canadian permanent residency for his wife and kids “in case the powers that be in Beijing ever pulled a Tiananmen again” (Crazy 142). Philip Young, on the other hand, exiles himself in Australia largely to escape the tethers of family responsibility and the increasingly materialistic Singaporean culture, a sentiment shared by his son, Nick. Despite the different motivations, however, all of these wealthy Singaporeans are flexible only to the extent their excessive wealth allows, that is, to obtain global residences, and in due time, permanent residencies.

In the universe of the *Crazy* series, flexible citizens are celebrated at least in part on account of their utter lack of threat to the existing neoliberal economy of the global south. In contrast to the “yellowing peril” narrative characterizing the image of Asian immigrant labor force in the late 19th and early 20th century, Kwan’s new Asian diasporic present no competition to the white labor force in any shape or form. Portrayed mostly as entrepreneurs (with the occasional doctor or professor), Kwan’s wealthy Asians are job providers, rather than job seekers, whose “flexible citizenship” is bolstered by their

ability to jet set at a moment's notice. While like many enterprising capitalists, the "first generation rich" has to violate laws and regulations during their initial stage of wealth acquisition (or so we learn from hush-hush family tales), they eventually achieve legality and uphold the rule of fair competition and fair trade. The "second generation (or above) rich," in comparison, is depicted with recognizable characteristics of the model minority, although with some significant caveats. Even the most frivolous of socialites, we learn, are expected to achieve academic success in a traditionally high-profit discipline, i.e., law, medicine or engineering, before giving up their careers to marry into staggering amounts of inherited wealth. Eddie Cheng, the series' ultimate label whore, was a stellar student and holds an impressive job as an investment banker. The gold-digging socialite Francesca Shaw, who puts a dead fish in Rachel Chu's purse just to eliminate her as a romantic competitor, turns out to be a high-power attorney. Although overachieving in their education and profession, these characters are not typical model minorities, i.e., obedient, eager to please, law-abiding citizens. In fashioning a variety of character types that complicate and indeed contend with the model minority stereotype, the series delineates a form of Asian exceptionalism without stereotyping it.

Finally, while the frequent use of Sinophone dialects energizes the *Crazy* series' diasporic readers and harks towards a Pan-Asian communal identity, the equally prevalent flaunting of British English by the wealthy Asian characters suggests the deep influence of British colonialism on Singapore, and by extension the entire Asia-Pacific region. While the older generation's conversation is strewn with Sinophone colloquialisms to the readers' delight, their British-educated children and grandchildren, third-generation-and-above rich, speak English almost exclusively. In fact, with a few

exceptions like the Shang matriarch, Suyi, all Singaporean as well as the second-generation-rich Chinese characters sport English names. For Kwan's Singaporean elites, the only commodity more sought after than designer luxury brands are a British public school education and perfect Queen's English, both of which serve to prove the old money's superiority to the nouveaux riche, and "equality" with the snobby *ang mor*. In addition to being a private language used among intimate friends and family, the Hokkien colloquialism used by the younger generation, especially male characters, is frequently lowbrow, punctuated by crass epithets indicating a lack of taste or culture. If the namedropping of designer brands ad nauseam by silly characters like Eddie Cheng betrays a curious sense of insecurity undergirding pomposity, the equally prevalent sprinkling of Sinophone colloquialisms seems guilty of preserving a mere façade of diversity in a series that derives its popularity largely from being written in English.

V. Rewriting Colonialism

In his discussion of national ideology and community formation, Étienne Balibar argues that the threshold condition to the formation of the nation-state "corresponds to the development of market structures and class relations specific to modern capitalism (in particular, the proletarianization of the labour force, a process which gradually extracts its members from feudal and corporatist relations.)" (88-9). However, capitalist relations alone couldn't completely account for the formation of a nation, as the circulation of capital and the exploitation of wage labor transcend national and institutional boundaries. Citing Braudel and Wallerstein, Balibar argues instead that national units form out of a larger "world-economy," "against one another as competing instruments in the service of the core's domination of the periphery" (89). For Balibar, this economic "core,"

represented by the central power of the nation state, has been pre-determined by “the early forms of imperialism and the articulation of wars with colonization. In a sense, every modern nation is a product of colonization” (89). It is therefore important to take into account this interplay of colonial influence and capitalist demands when analyzing the national ideologies of countries in the global south, many of which have achieved independence from colonial rule in the middle of the last century. Kevin Kwan’s rhetorical production of Singaporean history and, to some extent its nationhood, reflects this intricacy. In replicating the neoliberal multiculturalist celebration of Asian economic ascension under global capitalism, the *Crazy* trilogy naturalizes and indeed glorifies the expansion of global capital, colonial and industrial.

The series’ concluding installment, *Rich People Problems*, offers an intriguingly neocolonial take on Singaporean history, reconstructed through the fragmented memories of Su Yi, the Shang matriarch. As Su Yi’s mind deteriorates towards the end of her life, the narrative gains a historical perspective through multiple flashbacks to her younger days spent during the Japanese invasion of Singapore in the 1940s. These flashbacks exist at least in part to testify to the Shangs’ “old guard”²⁷ bona fides, in addition to highlighting the miracle of Singapore’s post-independence economic prosperity. In one flashback, for example, Suyi recalls the tale behind a medal of courage she received from the Queen of England. After attending a clandestine meeting during the Japanese occupation, Su Yi was arrested for breaking curfew and escorted to a Japanese military compound under the control of a colonel “known for his brutality” (588). Greeted by the sight of soldiers “carrying a body that was covered by a bloody sheet,” Suyi was surprised to find the colonel a “tall, elegant man sitting at the grand piano playing

Beethoven” (588). In a last-ditch effort to save herself, Suyi correctly identified the concerto No. 5 he was playing. Delighted by Su Yi’s knowledge, the colonel requested a performance of Debussy’s “Clair de Lune,” and set her free afterwards. Although overtly a critique of the Japanese invasion of Singapore, this episode surprisingly rests on a celebration of Su Yi’s and the colonel’s shared Europhilia, which emerges as the ultimate moral of the story. Despite multiple evidences of the colonel’s brutality, including tales that he once killed a boy merely for not saluting him properly, the episode seems to gush over his humanity, evinced through his artistic sensibilities. As Suyi finished playing, she “saw that there were tears in his eyes. It turns out that before the war, he had been in the diplomatic corps in Paris. Debussy was his favorite” (590). Su Yi’s European education and upbringing, itself a consequence of British colonialism, ends up a curious moral rejoinder to Kwan’s overt critique of imperialism, compounded no less, by the seal of approval from the Queen. The paradoxical relationship between overt critique and tacit endorsement of colonial domination, and the global movement of capital that drives and sustains it, is another central paradox of the *Crazy* trilogy.

More than language and ethnicity, class appears to be the primary organizer of the Sinophone community in the *Crazy* series, illustrated by the (un)varnished disdain the Singaporean “old guard” hold towards the nouveaux riche mainlanders. Rather than a sign of improving equality, the emergence of an elite class in countries like Singapore and China is simultaneous to the growing economic disparity and social stratification. In contrast to the extreme mobility of the “crazy rich” Asians are the extreme confinement of their live-in domestic help, many of whom literally taken from their homelands (mainland China and Thailand) without obvious recourse for return. In fact, one of the

series' most likable characters, Charlie Wu, commissions the construction of a house in Mainland China specifically for his old nanny to return for retirement. She refuses, saying that she would rather boss the other maids around the Wu mansion, which has now become home. This refusal amounts to a tacit endorsement of the status quo. In the same vein, Shang Suyi's live-in housekeeper, Lee Ah Ling, and chef, Lim Ah Ching, received a "cash legacy" of three million and two million dollars each, upon the Matriarch's death. A gesture of the benevolence that symbolically exonerates Suyi from charges of exploitation, the gifting of the housekeeper and other servants also serves to divert criticism from the exploitative modus operandi of global capitalism and its deeply colonial legacy.

The *Crazy* series, albeit satirizing the extreme extravagance of the nouveaux riches Asians, fails to present the underbellies of such prosperity. For instance, in the series final installment, it is mentioned offhandedly that the Aakaras, one of the wealthiest branch of the Shang-Young-Tsien triad who become Thai royalty through marriage, consumes only one "special mineral water from some obscure spring in the Bernese Oberland" (Crazy 218). On the occasion of their visit to Singapore, bottled water need to be shipped in via private jets, even though tap water is perfectly safe to drink in Singapore, not to mention the abundance of other local bottled water varieties. This incident is introduced primarily as one among a long line of jaw-dropping examples of the family's opulent lifestyle. However, viewed in relation to the history of water pollution in developing countries due to the demands of industrialization, in particular due to the western outsourcing of industries with high-environmental cost, the Aakaras' fastidious demand for bottled water becomes less envious, and more an evidence of the

economic exploitation and subsequent environmental devastation.

VI. Conclusion

It is not my intention to dismiss fully the political potential of deploying neoliberal multiculturalist rhetorical strategies to narrate transnational community belonging, despite my pointing out that it has proven quite effective and profitable in the neoliberal literary and cultural market. The success of the recent film adaptation of *Crazy Rich Asians* proves the potential of neoliberal narratives in promoting more flexible ethnic alliances among transnational communities. In addition to the narrative of Asian racial uplift, Kwan's strategic deployment of Sinophone languages capitalizes on the affective powers of language in transnational community-building. Rather than simply launching a resistance to the capitalist hegemony of the Global North, contemporary Asian diasporic writers like Kevin Kwan have taken a more ambivalent approach towards capital, often seen as the driving force behind transnationalism. Yet I do conclude that the production of ethnic and cultural identity in his novels is largely an economic process. This is reflected first and foremost in the series' emphasis on lineage, indicated in the elaborate family diagram at the beginning of each volume. Rather than a simple manifestation of Asian ancestral worship, the family diagram prescribes the proper passage of wealth, as the generations prior to the wealth acquisition are not mentioned in the family map, just as Singaporean history prior to British colonization is written over. The rhetorical production of diasporic Asian identity through the narrative of Asian racial uplift is an economic process, also in the sense that economic conflicts of interests tend to play out in terms of cultural conflicts, and human mobility is dictated by, or is troped as, financial liquidity. This is perfectly illustrated in the *Crazy* movie's intentional

sublimation of class tension into the “cultural” clashes between traditional Chinese family values embodied in Eleanor Young and the American individualism of Rachel Chu. Ultimately, the financial success of both the series and its filmic adaptation illuminates the ways in which ethnicity and race function as part of the global economic *habitus* that contributes to the exploitation of the Global South and normalizes conditions of inequality.

Chapter III

In Search of “Transculture”: Neoliberalism, Translation and Ventriloquism in

David Henry Hwang’s *Yellow Face* and *Chinglish*

As elaborated in my introduction, in the past decade scholars have slowly come to a consensus over the increasing complicity of Asian American literary studies in the neoliberal institution of the university, and have become more aware of the transformation of racial identities into forms of cultural and symbolic capital. Viet Nguyen, for example, argues that in idealizing the Asian American subject as “oppositional and subversive,” identity politics fails to recognize the commodification of race and the ways in which Asian American intellectuals has increasingly capitalized on their racial identity, becoming “panethnic entrepreneurs” (qtd. Lee 96). According to Mark Chiang, “In the post-Civil Rights era, material inequality remains a crucial domain of racial struggles, but for middle-class Asian Americans and other minorities, greater access to material resources has shifted the center of gravity of racial politics more toward the arena of symbolic struggles” (Lee 96). That is to say, “In a society where multiculturalism expresses the logic of the market, racial/ethnic identity has become a form of racial capital, and for Asian Americans in particular, identity politics has become inseparable from model minority discourse” (Lee 96). In addition to pigeonholing the Asian American community, the model minority discourse of the 90s collaborates with neoliberal post-racial discourses of the subsequent decades to perpetuate systemic injustice against Latino, Black and Native populations. Therefore, one of the main stakes in Asian American studies more generally is to figure out how to mobilize ethnic,

cultural, and racial identity in building greater pan-ethnic and interracial alliances without ignoring the heterogeneity within and across different minority communities.

In this chapter, I turn my attention to playwright David Henry Hwang, another Asian American writer who successfully transformed his racial identity as symbolic and actual capital. In an interview with theater critic Diep Tran, Hwang admits that, while his interest in China stems from his first generation Chinese American upbringing, the continued critical attention on his works is due to the economic rise of the country: “who could have guessed, when I started talking about China 40 years ago, that China was going to be so important that we were all going to have to think about China? So I feel like I lucked out in some ways” (“David Henry Hwang Backward and Forward”). Indeed, since *M. Butterfly*, Hwang’s Tony winning play that catapulted him into fame, his career has continued to thrive due to his unique vantage point in the global Chinese diaspora. His subsequent full-length theater projects, *Yellow Face* (2007), *Chinglish* (2011), as well as *Soft Power* (2018), all ponder over the American anxiety and optimism in response to China’s economic rise. Commenting on North American literary imagination of modern China, Kim Fu observes that, “two powerful and conflicting images ... are beginning to emerge. The first centers on the conspicuous consumption of China's nouveaux riches as they buy up designer stores and crash luxury cars a bacchanal of unbridled capitalism from the world's largest communist state. ... And then there is the traumatized, totalitarian narrative” (Factiva). Both *Yellow Face* and *Chinglish* straddle this chasm between China as a rising economic super power and China as one of a handful of self-proclaimed communist regimes in the world, yet both also seem to fit somewhere outside the two categories devised by Fu. *Yellow Face* offers up China as simultaneously a

futuristic land of development and a pristine mystical space in which one can achieve nirvana, whereas *Chinglish*, set at the moment immediately after an economic catastrophe in the US (the Enron bankruptcy), paints China as a promising alternative economic system governed by an increasingly neoliberal state whose desire for development erodes and destroys cultural tradition and values.

Yellow Face marks a clear shift in Hwang's theatrical project, away from the traditional anti-Orientalist themes represented by *M. Butterfly* towards a more self-conscious critique of the neoliberal capitalization of racial and ethnic identity in late global capitalism. While *Yellow Face* toys with the idea of transracial identification as an antidote to multiculturalism's lip service to "diversity," *Chinglish* revisits the East-West paradigm of *M. Butterfly* and posits the transcendence of language itself as means towards greater cross-cultural understanding. To better understand this thematic transition in Hwang's later works, I read *Yellow Face* and *Chinglish* as examples of what Russian cultural theorist Mikhail Epstein calls "transcultural" texts: texts that aim to transcend fixed linguistic and identity boundaries. Taken together, these texts illustrate Hwang's project of exploring flexible transnational belongings through theater. *Yellowface* and *Chinglish* also illustrate both the possibilities and constraints of a kind of utopic transculturalism, which Epstein envisions in response to globalism and multiculturalism.

In "Transculture," Epstein envisions a third alternative to the dueling discourses of globalism and multiculturalism, the former having devolved into US-centric cultural uniformity and the latter rife with practices of ethnic gatekeeping and self-ghettoization. Epstein proposes to understand how "globalization, in its positive vector," acts "not as a growth of homogeneity and unification among cultures but rather as their further

differentiation, ‘dissemination’ into transcultural individuals, strangers and fugitives from their native cultures”: “Thereby the entire project of multiculturalism, far from being abandoned, acquires a new, transcultural perspective” (349). Epstein advances his argument on transculturalism by citing the case of Araki Yasusada, a self-purported Hiroshima survivor whose large volume of testimonial poetry overtook the highbrow poetry world of the late 90s. It was revealed later, however, that Yasusada was himself a poetic persona created by two American poets, whose main purpose was to poke holes in the aesthetic of “authenticity” imbued in testimonial poetry. The emotional impact of the Yasusada poems, Epstein argues, is evidence of literature as a generative space that allows for the creation of transcultural identifications. Starting with *Yellow Face* and continuing with *Chinglish*, Hwang invents models of transracial and transcultural identification as alternatives to multiculturalism as the dominant ideological framework in the United States. Flipping the stereotypical East-West dynamic in unexpected ways, Hwang creates utopic versions of flexible transcultural participants who can maximize their cultural capital to take advantage of the transnational economy. However, these texts are ultimately neoliberal projects that reflect the vulnerability of any utopic imagining of cultural and racial transcendence.

I. Trans-racial Identity and Genre-Crossing in *Yellow Face*

In “The Year We Obsessed with Identity,” an article published in the New York Times in Oct 2015, Wesley Morris wrote that we are “in the midst of a great cultural identity migration. Gender roles are merging. Races are being shed. ... we’ve been made to see how trans and bi and poly-ambi-omni- we are.” Pop culture’s routine celebration of characters who transgress their socially prescribed identities seems in stark contrast to the

continuing labor of academics over the term “identity.” At the current moment in which, as Morris puts it, popular media routinely “turn selfhood into a circus” and characters “try out new selves every 10 minutes, as if they’re auditioning for ‘Snapchat: The Musical’,” academia has been slow to retreat fully from the thorny and contested subject of “identity”, a term too illusive to be rigorously examined, too personal to be universalized. Instead, their focus has turned towards an analysis of identity as both product and currency of the capitalist market. Critics of neoliberalism attributes the desire for identity transgression to a quintessentially neoliberal sleight-of-hand, which equates free trade with free choice, and free choice with freedom. In his critique of cosmopolitan neoliberalism, David Harvey observes that "the neoliberal ideological insistence upon the individual as foundational in political-economic life opens the door to extensive individual rights activism" (72). "But the limited objectives of many rights discourses," Harvey argues, “makes it all too easy to absorb them within the neoliberal frame, even as an oppositional culture” (74). In other words, by stressing the absolute primacy of individual “civil and political as opposed to economic rights,” policies of neoliberal multiculturalism mask the systemic inequalities inherent in contemporary capitalist democracies (74).

The academic disciplines of ethnic studies and Asian American studies owe their very existence to the Civil Rights Movement and its subsequent identity politics, and these disciplines reproduced distinct identity categories that have been difficult to dismantle even though many scholars have tried to do so. Thus, Lisa Lowe highlights the “heterogeneity, multiplicity and hybridity” of the Asian American community, and argues against the formulations of fixed racialized

identifications (in particular, Frank Chin's 1991 article "Come All Ye Asian American Writers of the Real and the Fake," in which he set up the creative works of Kingston, Tan and Hwang as representatives of revisionary or "fake" Chinese cultural history). Since Chin's influential article, many Asian American scholars have pondered over the demand for the diasporic writers and artists to "represent" their ethnic culture in some "authentic" way.²⁸ Laura Kang, for example, advocates for a flexible and "productive non-correspondence between Asian American literary studies and an 'Asian American literature' defined narrowly in terms of literary form, ethnic subject matter, and/or authorial identity" (Lee 302).

This vein of critique also informs Hwang's premise for *Yellow Face*, in which he satirizes the unintended consequences of identity politics in the era of neoliberal multiculturalism. Set in the aftermath of the protest against Jonathan Pryce's casting in the Broadway production of *Miss Saigon*, this semi-autobiographical faux-docudrama starts with the accidental casting of a white actor, Marcus G. Dolman, as the Asian lead in the new play, *Face Value*, written by DHH (David Henry Hwang's alter ego). This initial mistake is quite believable – given the increasing hybridity of the Asian American community, "you can't judge [someone's race] by appearance alone,"²⁹ Plus, "because of Equity rules, you can't just come out and ask an actor his race," which "would be illegal – and racist," the casting director adds wryly (66). This inadvertent yellowface casting is particularly ironic, since DHH is regarded as a champion against the practice of "yellowface"³⁰ and a leading Asian American activist, having led the protest against Pryce's casting in *Miss Saigon*. Realizing his mistake but unable to fire

Marcus for legal reasons and for fear of “losing face”³¹,” Hwang persuades him to change his name to a more Asian-sounding Marcus Gee, and then passes him as a biracial “Asian Siberian Jew.” Unexpectedly, Hwang’s endorsement launches Marcus’s career as a new Asian American star, whose transracial performance affords him not only professional success, but also a sense of communal belonging that he has previously struggled to attain. What started as a lie of omission to get a role turns into a seemingly genuine case of transracial identification, as Marcus then evolves into a leader in Asian American community activism. After making a donation to the 1996 Clinton Presidential campaign, Marcus is targeted by a John Huang-style congressional probe into illegal campaign donations. Suspecting Chinese governmental interference in the US presidential campaign, the republican led congressional investigation widely targeted donors with Asian sounding last names, most of whom American citizens.³² In an effort to point out the racist logic of the investigation, Marcus reveals his Caucasian identity to the press, which helps end the investigation at the cost of his own exile from the Asian American community. The story ends in true *Eat, Pray, Love* fashion, with Marcus embarking on a journey of self-discovery to China, where he ultimately finds his “true face” after being welcomed into a small rural ethnic community.

On a surface level, *Yellow Face* critiques the entrenched and continued practice of yellowface in popular media, which reflects the sustained pervasiveness of “yellow peril” discourse portraying Asian nations and people as military and economic threats to the US. However, in depicting the predicament

of casting directors, who are forbidden to inquire into an actor's racial identity yet expected to observe arbitrary standards of representational authenticity, Hwang also satirizes the contradictory demands of identity politics, particularly its neoliberal multiculturalist manifestations. The plausibility of miscasting a white actor in an Asian role highlights not only the heterogeneity of the Asian American community — how its pan-ethnic and mixed-race hybridity challenge monolithic representations of Asian American experience — but also the thin line between “authentic” performance and appropriation. Further, Marcus’ transracial performance as an Asian American role model serves as a foil to Hwang on both a diegetic and extradiegetic level. That is, in the fictional universe of the play, Marcus’s yellowface performance mirrors the imposter syndrome of Hwang’s fictive alter ego, DHH. Outside of the fictional narrative, Hwang’s creation of Marcus as a character can also be read as a projection of his ambivalence over the multiculturalist ethos, which ironically started and continues to sustain his successful career. As Hwang expresses in an interview with Jack Viertel on the creation of *Yellow Face*: “I remember being 23 and FOB opening at the Public and all of a sudden in certain circles I was considered a role model ... but it just sort of came along with the job” (61). Recounting the creation of his alter-ego, DHH, Hwang confesses: “I found that by creating a character that I actually gave my name to, in a strange way it liberated me to make him a character. ... It’s kind of counterintuitive, but by naming him after myself he became more of a character” (Boles, *Understanding David Henry Hwang* 104). Motivated more by a desire to be an “Asian American role model” than a genuine desire to fight

inequality, the DHH character seems to be plagued by imposter syndrome.

Beneath the lip service paid to “we must fight the power” is a deep seated fear over his own complicity in the construction of this “power,” and the uncanny feeling that he is himself performing in yellowface.

In fashioning a seemingly sincere discussion on the potential opportunities of transracial identifications, Hwang attempts to critique the politics of racial or ethnic gatekeeping that only serve to perpetuate rigid biological categories.

DHH: You’re running around, pretending to be Asian. You’re lying! To everyone! There - can you follow that?”

...

Marcus: You said it yourself, didn’t you? It doesn’t matter what someone looks like on the outside.

DHH: I didn’t mean that literally!

Marcus: Then how did you mean it? David, do you have a problem with anything I’m saying?

DHH: It’s not *what* you’re saying -

Marcus: It’s that *I’m* the one who’s saying it? Doesn’t that make your position kind of racist?

DHH: This is not that hard! In order to be Asian you have to have at least some Asian blood! (71)

This conversation illustrates the paradoxical relationship between race as a construct and as lived experience. For DHH, although race as constructed through the arbitrary assignation of certain collective qualities based on hereditary appearance is ultimately an illusion, the lived experience as a result of these arbitrary standards is nevertheless an important part of identity formation. Further, by tapping into DHH’s fear over losing his entire identity, professional as well as personal, Hwang also prompts the audience to appreciate the complicated motivations in acts of racial gatekeeping. In addition to seemingly surpassing DHH in his commitment to advancing the causes of the Asian American

community, Marcus even starts dating DHH's old girlfriend. "It's like he's trying to become me!" DHH explodes upon the latter revelation. More than playing for the laughs, DHH's fear that Marcus is becoming his white imposter quite accurately allegorizes the minority community's reaction to instances of cultural appropriation. By toying with the possibility of a "transracial" identity, Hwang not only attempts to account for the nuanced experience of racial hybridity but also aims to challenge the common conception of racial categories and its representation on biological grounds.

In contrast to the glib and self-serving image of DHH, Marcus comes off as a more sympathetic and altruistic character. In so doing, Hwang seems to gesture towards the possibility of transracial identification as an alternative to both multiculturalism and identity politics. The theme of representational authenticity is cleverly embodied in the mock documentary form itself. A cross between fictional and documentary theater, the story weaves fact and fiction together to create a utopic transcultural space. Highlighting the performative nature of identity and subjecthood, *Yellow Face* offers a way of viewing literature as a liminal space where identity transgression can truly happen. Literary production constitutes a kind of diasporic performance, the consumption of which offers the readers the opportunity to inhabit different planes of existence and thereby imagine transcendence.

Marcus' transracial identification, although fictional, uncannily mirrors the transracial claims of Rachel Dolezal, whose story first broke the news in 2015. In June 2015, Dolezal, the former Spokane chapter president of the NAACP, resigned following

the revelation that she is 100% white and not mixed-raced African American as she previously claimed. Dolezal's claim to be "transracially black" provoked national outrage, especially from the African American community. The majority of the criticism surrounds the way she knowingly takes advantage the hard-won opportunities designed for the African American community. The objection, in other words, is not over whether a white woman could teach Africana Studies or assume a leadership position in the fight against racial inequality on behalf of the African American community, which is practiced everyday across the United States. But it is specifically over her deception, the invention of African American lineage equipped with an elaborate backstory, and her inability to confess to what many consider indisputable fact: that she has no biological claim to the African American heritage. And it is the instance of her critics on this biological litmus test with which some has taken issues. While many find the circumstances of Dolezal's self-justification full of inconsistency and equivocation, some find equally disturbing the logic behind some of the critiques over her deception: namely, the insistence of her lack of biological lineage. This line of critique is well illustrated in two opinion pieces published in *Ebony* magazine. In one, the contributor Neffer Kerr writes: "Race is biological; it is NOT something you get to pick and choose." In the other, Britni Danielle lampoons the depth of Dolazel's deception with the argument that "she isn't Black at all. And by 'not at all' I mean not even one drop rule Black." Both articles are well-received as real black women telling it as it is. Both writers point out Dolazel's white privilege: that she can "shed her cork," so to speak, while the same luxury is denied most African Americans whose very existence is measured daily by the yardstick of nothing more than skin tone and hairstyle. However, the two quotes also

prove Dolezal's point: in citing the one-drop rule as the ultimate criterion for Dolezal's exclusion from the community, both writers are reaffirming the biological essence of race, which Dolezal claims to challenge.

Despite the overwhelmingly negative reaction to the Dolezal story, a few African American commentators and even scholars have spoken out in her defense. Adolf Reed Jr., most noticeably, points out the contradiction of the left's acceptance of transgender identity and their rejection of the so-called "transracial" identity. Many of those who adamantly oppose the possibility of transracial identity, Reed points out, would generally embrace transgender identity. To summarize this paradoxical logic, Reed observes that:

one kind of claim to an identity at odds with culturally constructed understandings of the identity appropriate to one's biology is okay but that the other is not – that it's OK to feel like a woman when you don't have the body of a woman and to act like (and even get yourself the body of) a woman but that it's wrong to feel like a black person when you're actually white and that acting like you're black and doing your best to get yourself the body of a black person is just lying."

To Reed, there is an ideological gap between the utopic vision of neoliberal multiculturalism and the practiced reality of racial gatekeeping: "the logic of the pluralism and open-endedness of identity they (the left) assert would require that they also accept the self-reports of claims to authenticity regarding identities that may diverge in other ways from convention." Reed's critique highlights the inconsistencies with which our current society treats race and gender. While both identity categories are widely acknowledged as social constructs derived from some type of biological reality, gender has emerged in recent years as more fluid, whereas race appear not to be. This is

why the largely positive reception of the transracialism in *Yellow Face* is all the more remarkable and deserves further scrutiny.

In the last chapter of his book *Diasporic Meditations*, R. Radhakrishnan poses a series of unanswered questions on ethnic American identity and authenticity. Chief among them is “How does authenticity speak for itself: as one voice or as many related voices, as monolithic identity or as identity hyphenated by difference?” (211) Queries into the nature of representational authenticity and passing are at the heart of *Yellow Face*. Just as Dolezal can successfully pass as biracial for more than a decade, the fictional Marcus’s identification as Asian is believable due to the reality of multiracial hybridity. As Bonnie Tsui observes in a New York Times article, “the need to categorize people into specific race groups will never feel entirely relevant” to the newer generation of multiracials, “whose perceptions of who they are can change by the day, depending on the people they’re with.” Hence Epstein’s call for transcultural identification, which offers freedom from the dual determinisms of Globalism and multiculturalism - “two determinisms do not make an individual freer, even though they create the illusion that a person can play on their contradictions and hide from the one in the shelter of the other” is particularly relevant in the twenty-first century. (329)

However, it is important to stress that any uncritical affirmation of individual “transracial” practices without careful acknowledgement of the history of racism and its lingering socio-political impact gets folded easily into the neoliberal “post-racial” discourse. Conversely, public outcry over transracial identification can equally easily be mobilized for political gains. Paralleling accounts of Dolezal’s transracialism was another headline story in 2015 involving the validity of the biracial identity of Shaun King, the

leading figure in the Black Live Matters movement. King wrote an impassioned response in which he convincingly justified his African American heritage, despite his white appearance. What's intriguing to me isn't the validity of King's biracial identity, but rather the clearly political motivations behind the query into his racial identification in the first place. The fact that the story first broke on the conservative news source Breitbart indicated that it was meant to detract from King's activism in the Black Lives Matter movement. Viewed from this light, the thorny issue of calling for racial "authenticity" from an individual biological standpoint becomes merely a smokescreen beneath which systemic racism hides. In other words, categorizations of racial identity, constantly mobilized in the discourse of identity politics, can be easily co-opted to distract from efforts of community building and collaboration across racial lines. This is exactly what David Henry Hwang attempts to address in *Yellow Face*.

Marcus's seeming achievement of fulfillment through Asian American identification and liberation from whiteness at the end *Yellow Face*, however, can't be taken at face value. On the surface, his transracial identification seems earnest if not foolhardy. Having taken on the burden of advocating for Asian American rights on behalf of the community that mistook him for one of their own, Marcus would sacrifice his own standing in the community for the advancement of its causes. Yet, his understanding of Chinese culture and what it means to be Asian is secondary and obviously filtered through racialized clichés. To pass as biracial Asian in his audition for DHH's *Face Value*, Marcus resorts to platitudes and the appropriation of the Japanese saying "Shikata ga nai", which is a line he picked up while performing alongside a Japanese American actor. Although he appears to have embraced his adopted Asian American identity in

subsequent years, even taking a leadership role in Asian American activism, Marcus continue to demonstrate an neo-orientalist understanding of Asian cultures. Exiled from the Asian American community, Marcus ends up in the remote regions of rural China, in a village populated by the Dong ethnic minority group. It is ironic that Marcus is directed to find “the soul of China” by a fellow “Waiguoren” or “foreigner.” Even more so, this “soul” of China lies not in “Shanghai, a city so futuristic that it makes Blade Runner look quaint,” but in a remote region populated by an ethnic minority group, the Dong, whose main mode of self-expression is the mythical Da Ge (大歌), or Big Song ceremony. In participating in this a communal performance, Marcus finally finds the acceptance he had missed, despite his total lack of comprehension of the lyrics. In the YouTube production of the play, the portrayal of Dong country consists of a misty bamboo forest with no sign of inhabitants except for the unintelligible song in stereotypical Orientalist flavor. Oddly paralleling this, Dolezal claims that her own transracial identity started when she identified, at a young age, with the anthropological photographs of aboriginal Africans in *National Geographic*. Thus, in both fiction and reality, what seems to be the adoption of a genuine sense of transracial identity might actually be cases of racial fetishism coupled with the White messiah complex.

What makes *Yellow Face* thought-provoking, of course, is the evidence of Hwang’s awareness of Marcus’s orientalist understanding of China. The setting of the Marcus’s journey in China, especially apparent in the YouTube production, could be read as intentional satire. However, there exists moments where Hwang’s rendering of Chinese culture could also be read as stylized “Orientalia for the intelligentsia,” as with the story of the butterfly³³, and with the mystical interpretation of the Chinese concept of

“face.” Further compromising the satirical effect of the play is DHH’s concluding remark:

Years ago, I discovered a face – one I could live better and more fully than anything I’d ever tried. But as the years went by, my face became my mask. And I became just another actor – running around in yellow face. ... That’s where you [Marcus] came in. To take words like ‘Asian’ and ‘American,’ like ‘race’ and ‘nation,’ mess them up so bad no one has any idea what they even mean anymore. Cuz that was Dad’s dream: a world where he could be Jimmy Stewart. And a white guy – can even be an Asian. (69)

This ending echoes Mikhail Epstein’s conclusion in “Transculture”: “a rule of thumb for transcultural diversity: oppose yourself to nobody, identify yourself with nothing. No identities and no oppositions—only concrete and multiple differences. The deeper is differentiation, the better is the prospect for universal peace” (350). Read alongside real instances of transracialism, Epstein’s argument for an absolute form of identity fluidity appears simplistic and void of careful engagement with the systematic forces behind identity formation.

In the next section, I suggest a reading of the “transcultural” as a trope for Hwang’s theatrical dialogism, with which Hwang implodes well-delineated cultural, ideological dichotomies such as male/female, West/East, White/Asian, self /other, in order to ultimately subvert larger dichotomies of authenticity vs. artifice, and reality vs. simulacra. While promising greater freedom, Hwang’s transcultural dialogism is itself a double-edged sword that sometimes perpetuates the mythology he sets out to debunk.

II. A Case for Mistranslations: Diasporic Ventriloquism and Translingualism in David Henry Hwang's *Chinglish* (2012)

In this section, I read Hwang's *Chinglish* (2011) as *M. Butterfly* 2.0, set against the backdrop of China's recent rise in the global economy. A sweeping comedy of cultural misunderstandings, *Chinglish* features a former Enron Executive, Daniel Cavanaugh, who tries his luck wading the muddy waters of the Chinese market in the hopes of salvaging his family's flailing signage business. After unwittingly participating in a slew of hilarious cultural mishaps, including falling in love with a duplicitous Chinese official whose assistance ultimately lands him the desired contract, Daniel ends up with a deeper appreciation for the impossibility of perfect understanding between East and West. Playing on the double meaning of the Chinese concept of "Guanxi (关系)" as both business and sexual relationships, the dynamic between the main characters, Daniel and Xi, is an allegory of the Sino-US relationship: based largely on speculations and mutual misunderstandings in the absence of a common tongue. As with *M. Butterfly*, *Chinglish* dramatizes Sino-US political relations through a gendered paradigm, flipping the conventional power dynamics between the white man and the Asian woman, giving the latter the upper hand. *Chinglish*, however, offers a much more historically situated commentary that undoes some of the problematic reproduction of the Orientalist stereotypes in *M. Butterfly*. "I was writing an actual Chinese woman rather than someone who was sort of living up to a Western fantasy of Asian women," said Hwang in an interview with Chicago Tribune, "As someone who represents the new China and the particular dynamic in this play, she's going to be a different kind of woman than the way

the West has always perceived Asian women." ³⁴

Further, I read *Chinglish* as a prime example of what Rita Wilson calls a “translingual text,” in which translation is not only a main theme, but also a *habitus*. Thus, Hwang’s translingual narrative not only serves to highlight the primary role of language and translation in facilitating transnational communications, but more importantly, gestures towards an alternative translinguistic *habitus* that transcends cultural boundaries. Here, my purpose is to read the translingualism in *Chinglish* as another example of Epstein’s “transculture,” which he characterizes as “the next level of liberation, this time from the ‘prison house of language’” that suborn nativism and cultural purity. (327)

Since its debut, *Chinglish* has garnered both mainstream popularity and critical acclaim. In “It’s All 官话 to Me,” Diep Tran observes that “traditionally, plays in which a foreign language would be appropriate have simply ignored its usage in favor of English, or foreign words and phrases are sprinkled intermittently throughout as a token reminder” (37). With half of its dialogues written and performed in Chinese, David Henry Hwang’s *Chinglish* (2012) is “the highest-profile bilingual play of our day,” and a rare example of theatre multiculturalism (Tran 37). As Hilton Als observes in his review of *Chinglish* for *The New Yorker*, “First-generation American writers often have two stories to tell. There’s the story of their inspiration and the quest for a discipline to give form to their imaginings. Then there’s a more constricted tale: the arrival myth.” Hwang, Als argues, is one of a few first generation writers “who don’t traffic in guilt or remorse, and who can laugh at their ethnicity and their families’ trials without ridiculing them.” A Chinese American playwright born to immigrant parents, Hwang is dubbed “a warm-blooded

satirist, both at home and not at home in the Asian and white worlds that he writes about,” and who “in an act of perverse ventriloquism, ... analyzes China and the lives of Chinese-Americans through Western eyes” (Als). “Ventriloquism” is a particularly apt analogy for the creative conjuring of Asia by diasporic Asian writers such as Hwang, whose body of work contributes to the flexible formation of a diasporic identity that is as imaginary as that of the nation.³⁵ Despite the play’s extensive use of Chinese on stage, it is intended primarily for a non-Chinese-speaking US audience, who has little trouble following the plot thanks to the English “surtitles” projected above the stage. In fact, the effectiveness of *Chinglish* as a bilingual text is contingent upon the possibility of accurate translation, which is interestingly at odds with its theme of the untranslatability of languages and cultures. In his characteristic suaveness, Hwang creates in the play such an illusion of seamless code-switching between Chinese and English, that AP’s Mark Kennedy is quoted on the cover, praising it as “a thoughtful, funny and poignant piece in which, miraculously, nothing gets lost in translation.” Considering that the crux of the story rests on things lost in translation, Kenney’s praise testifies to the power of creative “mistranslation” in simulating faithfulness to the source text, the masterful execution of which is Hwang’s signature move. This palpable tension between the emphasis on the untranslatability of cultures and the audience’s dependence on the presumed accuracy of translation is the very stake in *Chinglish*, and in fact, Hwang’s other projects.

I read Hwang’s diasporic ventriloquism as an embodiment of what Laura Kang calls a “productive non-correspondence” between authorial ethnic identity and the literature that writer produces. Thus ventriloquizing, Hwang rejects the demand for accurate or “authentic” representation, without disavowing his own diasporic identity. In

the “Editor’s Note on Language” preceding the main text of the play, it is explained that: “Dialogue is spoken in Mandarin Chinese, the modern standard language known in China as Putonghua (or ‘common language’).” The Chinese “surtitle,” however, will be “displayed in two formats: traditional characters: 簡體中文 and pinyin, the Romanization system from the People’s Republic of China.” (Editor’s Note, *Chinglish*) The choice to have the Chinese dialogues pronounced in Putonghua (普通话) used in Mainland China, and the surtitles printed in traditional/complicated Chinese characters used in Hong Kong and Taiwan but not in Mainland China is contradictory at first glance. Rather than criticizing this apparent “mismatch” in the playwright’s treatment of spoken and written Chinese, however, I read it as indicative of a transcultural perspective essential to Hwang’s diasporic ventriloquism.

From the start, Daniel has an unreliable perspective on Chinese culture and serves as a surrogate for the play’s mainstream American audience. Ventriloquizing through a white American protagonist, Hwang cleverly dodges the burden of “authenticity” that so often dogs the diasporic writer. As the play opens, Daniel blames the bad computer translations on the consolidations of Chinese characters after Mao’s “Simplified Chinese Movement.” The sign for “Dry Goods Pricing Department,” or “干货计价处,” Daniel observes, is mistranslated as “Fuck the Certain Price of Goods” (8). The mistranslation is one of the negative consequences of the “Simplified Chinese Movement,” Daniel opines, which includes the merging of the ideographs for “dry” and “to do,” the latter meaning being the main culprit of the mistranslation. According to Daniel, “after the Communist government came to power, Chairman Mao ordered that the centuries-old system of

writing Chinese characters – beautiful, arcane, devilishly complicated - be simplified for the ‘masses’ – or, as we would call them today, ‘consumers’” (8). In his haste to satisfy the demand of the Chinese cultural “consumers,” the argument seems to suggest, Mao inadvertently disrupted the otherwise organic development of the Chinese language and sacrificed its original beauty. It is clear that Hwang is voicing through Daniel his own critique of the simplified Chinese movement, as is evinced by his choice to have the Chinese dialogues rendered in complicated characters. However, Daniel’s facile analysis of Chinese socio-economic and socio-linguistic development begs further scrutiny. While it is true that the simplified Chinese word “干” as in “干货” (dried goods) is one of three phonetically identical characters in complicated Chinese (干, 幹, 乾) that were merged in simplified Chinese,³⁶ none of the three variations carries the meaning of “doing someone,” an imported usage from English. Therefore, the mistranslation is in fact a combined result of two linguistic developments in recent Chinese history: the “Simplified Chinese Movement” and the infiltration of English usages due to the forces of globalization. What even more striking is Daniel’s reference of the Chinese citizens of the 1950s as “consumers,” despite widespread anti-capitalist sentiments in mainland China at the time. Through Daniel’s transcultural perspective, Hwang renders a particularly contested part of Chinese political and linguistic history legible to his American audiences. By highlighting the continuity of a consumerist ideology from the Maoist era to Deng Xiaoping’s economic reform in 1990, Hwang’s ventriloquism also reconciles the sharp political and cultural polemics commonly associated with the topic, and gestures towards a critique of Chinese expansionism from a less politicized perspective. Finally, through selectively mistranslating Chinese cultural history to his

American audience, Hwang's transcultural and translingual narrative pokes fun of the constructed nature of representational "authenticity" itself.

Inevitably, however, the choice to tell the story from an American perspective leads to the mystifications of the Chinese culture and history. Take, for example, the following dialogue early on in the play when Peter Trims, a British expat scholar of Chinese language and philosophy recently turned business consultant, illustrates to Daniel the importance of "Guanxi," or "relationships":

Peter: "Relationship. It's almost a cliché now, but business in China is built on relationships."

Daniel: "This is the part about taking them out. Wining and dining."

Peter: "Wining and dining are just the beginning. You see for years, Western economists have held that a fair and consistent legal system – with predictable outcomes – is necessary for solid economic growth."

...
"... But, here in China the legal system is a joke. No one expects justice. And yet, the Chinese have maintained consistent growth over decades, at levels the West can only dream about."

Daniel: "with no justice system." (9)

This exchange attributes China's economic ascension in global economy to its apparent lawlessness, defying Western economic theories and common sense. China's near complete linguistic inaccessibility to the monolingual Daniel further compounds this cultural mystification. Linguistic opacity, combined with an apparent lack of a legal system, renders China into a mystical land where the Lacanian Law of the Father doesn't apply, with the mistranslated Chinese signs manifesting a breakdown in the signifying process.

In line with the ideology of neoliberal multiculturalism, cultural "flexibility" on both sides of the Sino-US exchange is highly desirable under the imperatives of economic globalization. As such, Hwang's diasporic ventriloquism encourages a form of

flexible political morality in the process of globalization, a flexibility that creates unexpected transnational alliances. For example, Daniel's sordid past as an Enron executive, a resume that stigmatized him in the American job market, is ironically what lands him a lucrative deal with the Chinese government. The corrupt bureaucrat, Cai, it turns out, is a critic of rampant capitalist expansion in China and secretly harbors nostalgia for a simpler cultural past. In this, Cai finds an unlikely friend in the Sinologist-turn-business consultant Peter Timms, who loves traditional Chinese culture but is forced to give up his academic pursuits to keep up with changing times. The only arbiter of justice in the play turns out to be a highly ambitious yet eminently corruptible "judge," who considers Daniel's involvement in the Enron scandal as evidence of his status as a "high roller" and thus a worthy business partner. When Daniel inquires the reason why Xi, Vice Minister of Culture of Guiyang, and wife of the Judge, is helping him despite orders to the contrary, she answers, "Because you – are good," and then in Chinese "可信 (Credible) " "可靠 (Trustworthy) ," "Honest. Good man" (59). Xi's trust in Daniel testifies to the power of American global media campaigns. Rather than feeling justifiably betrayed when Daniel admits to his involvement in the Enron scandal, Xi is both impressed and relieved, ignoring his willful misrepresentation of the solvency of his signage company. In addition to the moral flexibility of the Chinese government, Xi's reaction exemplifies the logic of speculative capitalism driving Chinese economic policies. Apart from the desire to "save face," having correct English signage is also the first step towards building the image of Guiyang as a cosmopolitan center of China, which will in turn generate more capital investment. Under the neoliberal logic of the market, Daniel's high-profile status as a former Enron executive is a desirable currency.

In emphasizing the financial logic behind cultural discourses, Hwang attributes the thawing of Sino-US political tension to the necessity of economic alliance under capitalist globalization.

Through analyzing the nature of the Mandarin texts as translation masquerading as source text in *Chinglish*, I read Hwang's diasporic ventriloquism as a continuation of his bid for a more transcultural conception of identity, one he envisioned in *Yellow Face*. Admittedly not a fluent Chinese-speaker, Hwang wrote the play in English first and then had the Chinese portion translated by the Hong Kong playwright, Candace Mui Ngam Chong. Partly due to the excellent translation by Chong and performance by Jennifer Lim, the Mandarin in *Chinglish* masquerades as the "original," allowing Hwang to ventriloquize "authentically" through the mouths of his Chinese characters. If, as Walter Benjamin suggests, translation is the afterlife of the original text, and carries its own historical and cultural meanings, then the reversal between text and translation reverts the chain of signification. The specter that it is, the Chinese translation masquerading as "original" becomes the allegory of the specter of history and culture that haunts the diasporic imagination. Hwang's diasporic ventriloquism, embodied in this "precession of the translation," is quintessentially postmodern. In his seminal work *Simulations*, Jean Baudrillard observes that in postmodernity, our perception of the real is often preceded by its representation, or *simulacra*. In his famous reading of Borges' *Empire*, Baudrillard argues that "The territory no longer precedes the map, nor survives it. Henceforth, it is the map that precedes the territory - PRECESSION OF SIMULACRA" (123). Here, "the precession of simulacra" delineates the way in which signs precede the signified in our perception of the world. In *Chinglish*, language function as simulacrum that precedes and

therefore determines the audience's perception of reality. Beyond providing comic fodder, the mistranslations further point to the absolute primacy of language in our encounter with the world.

In her chapter "Mediating the Clash of Cultures through Translingual Narrative," Rita Wilson defines "translingual narratives" as narrative that is "located between languages: whether languages in the conventional sense of the term or different modes of discourse operating within and drawn from discrete polysystems" (46). In translingual texts, Wilson observes, "translation is less a distinct operation and more a *habitus*, in which the breathing space between two languages, or between the message intended by the speaker and the message received by the listener, becomes a space of latent resistance." (Wilson 46)³⁷ *Chinglish* fits the bill of Wilson's translingual text on several levels. First, as a bilingual text, *Chinglish* thematizes the perils of translation, and indeed of the very act of signification, both linguistic and cultural. Second, Hwang's diasporic ventriloquism is itself an embodiment of translation as more than linguistic operation, but is indeed a form of cultural *habitus*. Finally, in translating the primacy of linguistic and cultural *habitus* into financial terms, Hwang contributes to a larger neoliberal project that promotes the formation of flexible diasporic identities.

Hwang's clever use of "guanxi (relationships)"³⁸ to signify both financial and romantic relationships points to a connection between the cultural and financial *habitus* governing Chinese society. In an attempt to establish a business relationship (关系), Daniel finds himself alone in a restaurant with Xi Yan, the vice minister of culture. When a harmless remark is misunderstood as a sexual proposition, Daniel becomes romantically involved with Xi, only to realize later that she has ulterior motives in their relationship.

Initially appearing to embody the modern Chinese woman who isn't afraid to pursue "free love" against traditional cultural expectations, Xi turns out to be a dutiful wife devoted to advancing the career of her husband, a provincial judge with mayoral ambitions. In response to Daniel's proposal of "love" (爱), Xi speaks instead of the "情谊" in her marriage, a sentiment with no direct correspondence in English. One of Hwang's main projects in *Chinglish* is the excavation of untranslatability of concepts such as "情谊," which troubles the signifying capacity of translations.

For Hwang, the Chinese economic reform of late 20th century both bastardizes traditional Chinese culture and engenders renewed interest in its particularly globalized and commercialized reinvention. In mediating the interaction between the disgraced American businessman and the fledgling Chinese state business leadership through mistranslation and mistaken romance, *Chinglish* exemplifies the neoliberal tendency to sublimate financial dealings into cultural matters, which in turn calls for the adaption of the local cultural *habitus* to the increasing demands of the global market. In depicting China and the United States as lands mutually shrouded in ambiguous and often mistranslated signs, Hwang excavates the possibility for cross-cultural empathy and collaboration. A story that blurs the lines between romance and commerce, *Chinglish* explores the politics and poetics of cross-cultural communication from a transcultural perspective, and gestures towards alternative modes of imagining relationships between East and West, a perspective steeped in the neoliberal logic Mikhail Epstein sets out to counteract.

Chapter IV

The City and Its Refugees: The Geopolitics of Non-Places in Mohsin Hamid's *How to Get Filthy Rich in Rising Asia* and *Exit West*

I. Introduction

In *Non-Places: An Introduction to Supermodernity* (1995), French anthropologist Marc Augé's coins the term "non-place" to depict "a space which cannot be defined as relational, or historical, or concerned with identity" (63). One of Augé's major assessments about our current era of "supermodernity" is the proliferation of non-places, a world where people are born in the clinic and die in hospital, where transit points and temporary abodes are proliferating under luxurious or inhuman conditions ... where a dense network of means of transport which are also inhabited spaces is developing; where the habitué of supermarkets, slot machines and credit cards communicates wordlessly, through gestures, with an abstract, unmediated commerce ... (63)

Based primarily on the model of the European metropolis of the late 20th century, Augé's formulation of non-place inadvertently epitomizes the sensation of precarity and ephemerality commonly experienced in late global capitalism. The ubiquity of non-places has fundamentally changed the human relationship to place: from one that is grounded in the familiarity of the local to one that is superseded by an uncanny recognition-without-identification that typifies modern experiences of globality. Thus, just as Baudelaire's urban milieu produces the quintessentially modern European figure of the *flâneur*, Augé's supermodernity, built upon the proliferation of non-places, produces the global inhabitants of our time. While Augé believes that the inability of the urban non-place to

induce identification and a sense of belonging adumbrates an age of individual hyper-isolation, this recent development in human geography also undeniably ushered in an age in which the experience of travel and migration, voluntary or otherwise, is facilitated, normalized and universalized.

Reading Pakistani-born writer Mohsin Hamid's sketches of the contemporary urban milieus as exemplary non-places of the Global South, I argue that Hamid critiques global neoliberal expansion and advocates an ontological shift in our current discussion of global diaspora. Hamid's penchant for abstraction and non-referentiality gives his works a fable-like quality, an aesthetic choice that captures the modern experience of non-places. Two of his most recent novels, *How to Get Filthy Rich in Rising Asia* (2013) and *Exit West* (2017) contain signature allusions to recognizable but anonymous locations, communities and even consumer products; these serve as reflections upon the expansion of globalized imageries alongside the increasing mobility of people, capital and goods driving the proliferation of "non-places" worldwide. In an interview with Harleen Singh on his 2007 *Reluctant Fundamentalist*, Hamid admits to being a "mongrel," who is "somewhat agnostic about the notion of citizenship." In fact, Hamid's non-referential narratives embody this mongrelized aesthetic, characterized by mobility, hybridity and flexibility. The status of citizenship, Hamid argues, entails "enjoy[ing] equal rights and privileges with other citizens and ... the right to express themselves through the political process, should they choose to do so" (151). "In my world," Hamid goes on, "all long-term residents would be citizens of wherever they were residing for a long term" (151). If this universalist conception of citizenship was inchoate in *The*

Reluctant Fundamentalist, it has evolved to become the ideological and aesthetic foundation of *Exit West*.

In addition to having a wider referential scope in the portrayal of the “mongrelized” cosmopolitan experience, the anonymity of both characters and settings in Hamid’s novels also highlights the ubiquity of global capital and its transformation of the local environs. In an off-handed aside, for example, the protagonist in *How to Get Filthy Rich in Rising Asia* is seen eating breakfast in a kiosk “festooned with the logos of a global soft-drink brand,” which most readers would identify as Coca Cola or Sprite. By omitting the actual brand, however, Hamid highlights the global infiltration of international conglomerates via ubiquitous branding campaigns in the typical urban non-place, the intangible yet unmistakable influence of which produces the increasing “flattening” of the globe. Written in an age of instant long-distance communications that produce imagined extra-national communities, Hamid’s novels highlight the potential of the non-place as a trope for the diasporic condition - a state of transience, a portal mediating between origin and destination. Thus, reading Hamid’s novels is akin to the experience of traveling abroad in the contemporary moment, an experience transformed by the proliferation of non places driven by capitalist expansion.

Unlike traditional ethnic literature that rely on identity politics, Hamid’s novels represent a fresh alternative, therefore provide a useful framework for immigrant and refugee studies. In Augé’s concepts of supermodernity, it is primarily technological advancements that result in the proliferation of non-places. In the war-torn Asian country of *Exit West*, however, it is military action in response to political conflicts, albeit aided by advanced technology, that devolves the familiarity of places and produces uncanny

non-places such as squats and refugee camps. For instance, mortar attacks erode the elaborate edifices of Saeed's parents' colonial-era apartment building, we're told, "as though [war] had accelerated time itself, a day's toll outpacing that of a decade." (22) The apartment's previously coveted view, overlooking a bustling commercial district, is likened to "staring down the barrel of a rifle" in times of war. Quipping the realtor's mantra of "Location, Location, Location," Hamid wryly comments, "Geography is destiny" (22). This line poignantly alludes to the current debates over immigration and refugee crisis across the globe, in which one's entitlement to basic human rights, and consequently one's destiny, is quite literally dependent on one's place of origin. In juxtaposing the breakdown of the traditional conception of "place" with the ubiquitous sprawling of non-places, Hamid not only indicts the acts of violence producing these non-places, but also challenges the place-based ethics dominating current debate on immigrant and refugee rights. The above depiction of the accelerated deterioration through time of "places" fit to be called "home" evokes David Harvey's conception of place in temporal terms,

[T]he process of place formation is a process of carving out 'permanences' from the flow of processes creating spatio-temporality. But the 'permanences', no matter how solid they may seem, are not eternal but always subject to time as 'perpetual perishing.' They are contingent on processes of creation, sustenance and dissolution" (261).

Thus conceptualizing place-formation in a fluid framework of constant spatio-temporal (ex)change, Hamid echoes Harvey's challenge of the traditional place-based ontology, which in turn uproots the place-based ontology of identity formation.

Finally, in terms of form, Hamid's novels are narrative non-places themselves. In addition to his signature non-referentiality, the "non-place" quality of Hamid's narratives manifests in the faux self-help genre experimentation in *HTGFRIRA*, and in the short interludes and vignettes strewn across *Exit West*. As a comment on the incredible accessibility of cyber space and means of global travel, Hamid has his protagonists escape their war-torn homeland through a multitude of wormholes, or "magic doors," materializing all around the globe. In addition to serving as the *deus ex machina* facilitating the global movement of refugees, these doors represent the proliferation of non-places. Paralleling the appearance of these wormholes are the multiple narrative vignettes. As we follow the central plot of Nadia and Saeed's migration, these minor plotlines of others who find their ways through the magic doors overlay onto each other to form a bird's-eye view of a revolution of human movement and demographic transformation. While some reviewers read these narrative interludes as a flaw or sign of inexperience, I read them as a well-considered narrative strategy on Hamid's part. The seemingly unrelated and somewhat underdeveloped subplots of transcultural encounters, ranging from romantic to deadly, serve to universalize the experience of human movements without overpowering the main plot. Viewed together, they each become a vessel, or non place that, in their lack of connection, coherence and resolution, mimic the reality of migrant journeys in the current moment.

As Hamid describes in several interviews, the shortening of the journey across continental divides into the relatively simple crossing of a threshold is meant to direct the reader's attention to the aftermath of migration instead. For both *How to Get Filthy Rich in Rising Asia* and *Exit West*, the human precarity resulting from the proliferation of

neoliberalism in the Global South typifies an experience of dislocation in late global capitalism. While varying in degrees and urgency, the “home” in both narratives is stripped of its capacity for protection against precarity, and thus must be abandoned in favor of survival elsewhere. Anticipating and responding to unprecedented human tidal waves from the Global South to the Global North, as well as from the rural to the urban regions, Hamid’s narrative highlights the conceptual impermanence of “places” and ambitiously imagines a reshuffling of the world’s population and resources. By setting his stories in the non-place of anonymous metropolises penetrated by advertisement, social media and electronic surveillance, Hamid depicts a postmodern human mobility which derives from and contributes to the expansion of imagined communities beyond national boundaries.

II. The Filthy Urban “Non-Place” in *How to Get Filthy Rich in Rising Asia*

Mohsin Hamid’s third novel, *How to Get Filthy Rich in Rising Asia*, paints a sobering picture of the Asian economic miracle, exposing the underbelly of its neoliberal logic of success. Set in a major city in an unnamed Asian country resembling Hamid’s hometown of Lahore, Pakistan, the narrative opens onto a harrowing scene of an anonymous village in so-called “rising Asia,” choked by pollution and poverty. Born in this extremely impoverished environment, Hamid’s main character, referred to simply as “you” in the story, is first introduced to us as a boy huddled under his mother’s bed, suffering from Hepatitis E, transmitted through fecal matter in the water. Despite these humble origins, the protagonist gradually rises to financial success through a combination of perseverance, delayed gratification, luck, and the capacity for moral compromise. Ultimately a love story with a rags-to-riches plotline (until the last chapter), the narrative

follows the journey of the protagonist's "rise," which is largely fueled by a desire to impress the love of his life, a neighborhood girl referred to simply as "the pretty girl." Having embarked on her own journey towards filthy richness, "the pretty girl" looms forever near, yet remains out of the protagonist's reach until the very last chapter of the book. In reuniting the protagonist and the pretty girl, now in relative poverty, at the end of their lives, Hamid's *Global South* echoes *The Great Gatsby* in indicting the unreality and unreliability of the neoliberal bootstrap narrative, and redirects its readers towards a different kind of fulfillment.

On the surface, *HTGFRIRA* takes literally the edict of neoliberalism that "All conduct is economic conduct; all spheres of existence are framed and measured by economic terms and metrics, even when those spheres are not directly monetized." (Brown 10)³⁹ Aspects of the second-person narration reminds the reader of a traditional self-help guide, a genre heavily reliant upon the neoliberal ideology; in typical self-help narrative fashion, the trajectory of "your" lifetime appears to be guided by pithy imperatives that starts each chapter, such as "Move to the City," "Get an Education," "Avoid Idealists," etc. Like most self-help books, these principles for success are designed to transform the reader's life through regimented modification of everyday practice in order to maximize economic outcome. In the context of rapid industrialization and urbanization in "rising Asia," it is not surprising that the first advice given to the protagonist is to move to the city. For city life, despite its inherent "insecurity" and "anxiety," also offers the "productivity and potential" necessary for "your" rise. However, just as "self" in this self-help guide is ambiguous – the giver and receiver of advice being arguably the same person, the protagonist's migration to the city is rather

involuntary, propelled by the poverty and lack of job opportunities for his father in their home village. Thus, this edict for entrepreneurial success, as with the other neoliberal principles in this book, is merely a self-fulfilling prophecy.

Laura Savu Walker reads *HTGFRIRA* as illustrative of a kind of “cruel optimism,” which Lauren Berlant defines as “when something you desire is actually an obstacle to your flourishing.” (192)⁴⁰ For example, the imperative in the novel, “Don’t Fall in Love,” presents the protagonist with a false dilemma between wealth and love. Starting with a typical bootstrap script of self-denial and delayed gratification, the novel slowly exposes the false promises of this neoliberal logic and ponders over the fundamental precarity of existence in the Global South in late capitalism. Weihsin Gui similarly reads Hamid’s *How to Get Filthy Rich in Rising Asia* as a novel “that perform a narrative renovation of neoliberalism’s creative destruction” (173). Citing Adorno’s aesthetic theory to “consider contradictions as productive tensions rather than crippling flaws in artworks,” Gui argues that “while the conceptual rigor of neoliberal rationality and entrepreneurial discourse seeks verisimilitude and fixation, artworks’ mediated form generates a corresponding volatility that reconfigures politico-economic elements along an aesthetic dimension” (183). “Through a stylized prose that imitates rather than authenticates the economic and empirical world,” Gui argues, “Hamid’s fictions reconfigure and tease a different sensibility out of the language of Rising Asia discourse” (173). Building on these works, I argue that Hamid critiques globalized neoliberal expansion through the deployment of a “mongrelized” aesthetic, and rejects the place-based logic of identity formation using the trope of non-places.

The precarity of urban life manifests first in the chaos and (dis)organization of urban spaces. Unlike the typical metropolis in the Global North, “your city is not laid out as a single-celled organism, with a wealthy nucleus surrounded by an ooze of slums” (20). This lack of a spatial organization based on wealth disparity is due to the city’s lack of “sufficient mass transit” as well as, “since the end of colonization generations ago,” a lack in “governance powerful enough to dispossess individuals of their property in sufficient numbers. Accordingly, the poor live near the rich” (20). This spatial narrative of “rising Asia” not only indicts the process of accumulation by dispossession during European colonization, but also lambastes the new forms of precarity produced by its post-independence neocolonial elite regime. This critique echoes Grace Hong’s account of recent development in the neoliberal reconfigurations of the Global South, which includes the “creation of a class of elite Global South nationalist state managers and bureaucrats in the wake of decolonization (a class that facilitates and profits from the neocolonial extraction of wealth from the Global South to the Global North).” (11)

The protagonist and his family are part of a growing population of domestic economic refugees, expelled from the countryside into the intestines of the cities by the momentum of Asia’s economic rise. Without the security and stability traditionally associated with home, or “place,” the protagonist and his family share a similar sense of precarity and dislocation with global migrants and refugees. The faux self-help manual’s first edict thus calls for a willing surrender to a precarity that is the prerequisite for upward social mobility in “rising Asia”. The edict “Move to the City” further characterizes the rising Asian city as a threshold, one that promises to deliver its new inhabitants from poverty to wealth. Despite this potential for the lucky few, the majority

of the urban citizenry live in perpetual precarity. Purchasing a home of one's own, for example, is a Herculean accomplishment that eludes those with modest means. Thus, the majority of the population in this rising Asian city settle for purchasing a "resident's bond," which grants one "the right to live rent-free in your rooms for a set number of years, after which your landlord must repay your principal" (114). That is to say, a majority of the middling masses of rising Asia dwell in "non-places." Despite the lack of permanence of a resident's bond, it nonetheless offers a sense of "security akin to home ownership, temporarily, for the duration of the bond," therefore "a rest stop on the incessant treadmill of life" (114). The appearance of non-places as homes in the cities of rising Asia indicates the increasing precarity of life in the region, despite, or perhaps due to, its envious economic performance.

Finally, Hamid's urban non-place is bleak and polluted, one that exacerbates the experience of precarity and is potentially deadly. In one strand of classical western intellectual thought, nature/environment is conceived as equivalent to "space." In contrast to the pristine supermodernity characterizing Augé's cosmopolitan city in the Global North, the urban environment in the Global South is characterized by environmental degradation. In fact, the "filthy" in "filthy rich" is a double-entendre, as it is literally filthy in the anonymous city in rising Asia. In "Water, White Tigers, and Corrupt Neoliberalism," Alonso-Breto observes the symbolic meaning water in Asian cultures, particularly in Hinduism and Islam, highlighting symbolic significance of water pollution. Indeed, water pollution is a major focal point of *HTGFRIRA*, evidenced in the covers of several different editions of the book, one of which features a drop of water encompassing a pair of lovers, and the other a goldfish swimming in a pool of clear blue

water. The novel begins with the protagonist nearly dying from Hepatitis E, a water-borne highly transmittable disease. When the family move to the city, the tenement building in which they live reeks of the sewer in a back ally, devoted to, we're told "small-scale manufacturing, to operations that because of their sonic, aromatic, visual, or chemical noxiousness are unpopular in a high-density neighborhood such as this one, and therefore utilize the enclosed courtyard as a partial veil" (30). It is therefore apt that "you" becomes a self-appointed "water industrialist," taking advantage of the fact that "Your city's neglected pipes are cracking" with dire consequences: "Those less well-off among the citizenry harden their immune systems by drinking freely, sometimes suffering losses in the process, especially of their young and their frail" (99). The human cost of water pollution is nowhere better illustrated than in the premature death of the protagonist's sister a few chapters later, from dengue transmitted by mosquitoes bred in the "pools of stagnant water" one monsoon season (131). With a keen eye for opportunity, the protagonist turns the great demand for clean water in his city into a viable business, making his first pot of gold from producing counterfeit bottled water. An underground operation that eschews any environmental and health regulation, the protagonist's business scheme consists of pumping polluted underground water into his apartment, boiling it just enough to kill bacteria but not enough to compromise profit, before repackaging it into recycled bottles from mainstream bottled-water brands. This capitalist profit-oriented ethos has paid off for the protagonist, now on his way towards achieving "filthy richness."

This successful bid for entrepreneurship and upward mobility, however, isn't so much proof of the virtues of free market competition, as it is a testament to the necessary

moral compromises required for survival. As Alonso-Breto argues, the modernity reflected in “rising Asia” narratives such as *HTGFRIRA* is characterized by “its extreme mercantilist accent,” which demands a particular “moral ambiguity” or “ethical laxity” from their readers (7). Narratives such as *HTGFRIRA*, “entail a clear invitation to empathize, if not fully sympathize,” with their morally questionable protagonists (10). The subaltern, as it turns out, cannot speak indeed. Instead, “these ‘Asian-type Horatio Algiers’ (Mishra 2013) appear as the unofficial spokespersons of a large sector of Indian and Asian societies which is left lagging behind in the vertiginous race of rising Asian economies” (Alonso-Breto 19). However, in portraying sympathetic protagonists whose compliance with the tenets of neoliberalism is initially about survival, Hamid’s narrative assumes a postcolonial perspective. The protagonist’s early struggles in establishing a bottled-water business, for instance, contrast sharply with the unquestionable dominance of global beverage brands like Coca Cola, whose ubiquity in the Global South offers no relief on the local water shortage, but rather serves as a constant reminder of greener pastures elsewhere. And, by the novel’s end, the anonymous Asian country is embarking on a new residential project that will boast of drinkable water even for one’s backyard, a project that, if achieved, will bring the living standard in this special residential zone neck-in-neck with, poignantly, that of developed countries. This new project, however, is mired in obstacles, not only because of the country’s huge bureaucratic machine, but also due to its sinking water table. And if achieved, it will further widen the divide between the lives of its rich and its poor, depleting the resources of the latter to prop up a false sense of prosperity for the former. It is no coincidence that the protagonist’s own bid for filthy richness contributes to the environmental degradation of his country and the

physical deprivation of his countrymen. This mounting precarity of the environment remains largely unresolved, and perhaps unresolvable, despite the protagonist's attainment of love and a higher sense of purpose towards the end of his life.

III. The “Moral Geography” of Refugee Migration in *Exit West*

Hamid's fourth and most recent novel, *Exit West* (2017), opens in a similarly anonymous, post-independence Middle Eastern country, this one on the verge of civil war. The narrative follows a young couple, Saeed and Nadia, as they escape from their besieged home country through a series of magical doors that have mysteriously appeared all around the world. Unlike normal doors that join separate but adjacent spaces, these magical portals connect random geographic locations, transporting Saeed and Nadia first to Greece, then London, and eventually Marin, California, where they settle. Taking a further imaginary leap from *HTGFRIRA*, Hamid delves into an extreme version of human precarity in the Global South that demands a more radical form of mobility. Anticipating, and responding to, unprecedented diasporic tidal waves from the Global South to the Global North, Hamid's narrative ambitiously imagines a reshuffling of the world's population and resources through the appearance of magic portals facilitating such mobility. In addition to serving as the *deus ex machina* for alleviating the global refugee crisis, these doors through which many escape different forms of precarity, are also non-places, or a physical embodiment of the incredible accessibility of the cyber space and means of global travel.

Appearing in random locations, the doors blur the boundary between public and private spaces, and disrupt previously clear-cut divisions between interiority and

exteriority. The readers' first introduction to these doors, for example, is through a brief account of a brown man emerging through a pitch black closet door into a house somewhere in Australia, unbeknownst to its white female owner. In his characteristically economic prose, Hamid observes: "The door to her closet was open. Her room was bathed in the glow of her computer charger and wireless router, but the closet doorway was dark, darker than night, a rectangle of complete darkness—the heart of darkness. And out of this darkness, a man was emerging" (18). The wry allusion to Conrad connects the lineage of colonialism and racism with its present and futuristic manifestations. Here, as on many occasions in contemporary life, a brown man unwittingly finds himself intruding into the heart of whiteness, and in so doing finds himself perceived as a menace, even though it is the brown body that is under imminent threat of violence. Having "[grown] up in the not infrequently perilous circumstances in which he had grown up," the unwitting intruder is extremely "aware of the fragility of his body. He knew how little it took to make a man into meat: the wrong blow, the wrong gunshot, the wrong flick of a blade, turn of a car, presence of a microorganism in a handshake, a cough. He was aware that alone a person is almost nothing" (18). This narrative interlude, or narrative non-place, thus highlights the irony of optics vs ontology. Further, the doors challenge the presumed inviolability of domestic spaces, forcing the readers to question the rationale behind claiming ownership to any space, and by extension ownership, or nativeness, to any national territory. Although this scenario ends peacefully with the man's quick exit through a window, other similar accounts in the narrative end with threats of imminent violence.

According to Jia Tolentino's *New Yorker* review, there exists in *Exit West* a

“constant underlying movement, and a sense that intrinsic laws of moral physics are at work” (“A Novel”). Indeed, the concept of multi-dimensional portals that bypass all borders and distance offers a bold rejoinder to the nativist rhetoric in the Global North, from Brexit to Trump’s border wall. And, while in the territory of magical realism, the trope of magical doors is but one small imaginary leap beyond our current reality of massive human migration around the world, exacerbated by poverty and political unrest, and facilitated by the latest technology of transportation and other forms of mobility through the expansion of mass-mediated imaginary communities.

For Hamid, the concept of nativeness and its narrativization, manifesting in land ownership, simply contradicts history. Commenting on the small Native American presence in Marin, CA, Hamid notes that:

it was not quite true to say there were almost no natives, nativeness being a relative matter, and many others considered themselves native to this country, by which they meant that they or their parents or their grandparents or the grandparents of their grandparents had been born on the strip of land that stretched from the mid-northern-Pacific to the mid-northern-Atlantic, that their existence here did not owe anything to a physical migration that had occurred in their lifetimes. (290)

In recounting the histories of settler colonialism in North America, Hamid highlights the relativity, if not fictionality, of nativeness. It is therefore not unintentional that in *Exit West*, the areas hardest hit by refugees are formerly wealthy areas with near-empty mansions, whose absentee owners often won’t notice the occupation of their properties for some time. The repopulation of the world’s wealthiest and most exclusive

neighborhoods by the world's most dispossessed exemplifies the "moral physics" underwriting *Exit West*.

If origin and destination are "places" inflected with dueling senses of belonging and dislocation, the transient space of "non-place" is the in-between, where the work of imagination has its greatest potential. The ubiquity of non-place in late modernity is of important geopolitical significance, as it prioritizes the experience of transience and strips "nativeness" or "at-homeness" of their positive moral valence. Similar to airports, train stations and other ubiquitous junctures of transportation, these doors are the primary sites of diasporic encounters, simultaneously sites of loss/death and of (re)birth. Thus, Hamid imagines the non-places as protean spaces of both genesis and resistance. Further, the doors offer a radically imaginative way of conceptualizing the non-place: "It was said in those days that the passage was both like dying and like being born, and indeed Nadia experienced a kind of extinguishing as she entered the blackness and a gasping struggle as she fought to exit it" (150). If the junctures of departure and arrival are often conflatable due to their uncannily identical appearance and function in modern travel, the doors completely collapse points of ingress and egress. In so doing, the non-places in the shape of doors metaphorically eliminate the space-based ontological binaries between origin and destination, inside and outside, private and public, native and foreign.

Finally, the greatest hope Hamid offers in *Exit West* lies in the cyclical nature of place and non-place, particularly the human tendency to transform non-places into places of belonging. According to Augé, "place and non-place are rather like opposed polarities: the first is never completely erased, the second never totally completed; they are like palimpsests on which the scrambled game of identity and relations is ceaselessly

rewritten” (64). The idea of place and non-place as palimpsests to each other is reminiscent of De Certeau’s idea of “space” as “places” inscribed with symbolic meaning.⁴¹ In *Exit West*, just as places previously thought of as “homes” are lost to war or natural disaster, the non-places such as squats and shelters are constantly transformed into homes, as human activity inscribe meaning onto them. Saeed and Nadia’s second migration from Greece to London marked an important turning point in the narrative. From the door in Greece, they emerge to find themselves inside an upscale townhouse in a London suburb. Just as doors lead to random spaces, refugees arrive to the townhouse from all over the world. Strangers thrown together in close proximity, squatters in Nadia and Saeed’s new temporary home quickly form a democratically organized “committee,” both to arbitrate internal disputes and to advocate for their group interests externally. In a short period, residents transform a random squat into a community, the same way “places reconstitute themselves in [non places]; relations are restored and resumed in it” (Augé 64). Similarly, after Nadia and Saeed’s relationship dissolves, Nadia moves into the storage room upstairs to the local co-op where she works. Despite the fact that the “room smelled of potatoes and thyme and mint and the cot smelled a little of people, even though it was reasonably clean,” Nadia “was nonetheless reminded of her apartment in the city of her birth, which she had loved, reminded of what it was like to live there alone, and while the first night she slept not at all, and the second only fitfully, as the days passed she slept better and better, and this room came to feel to her like home” (314-5). Accessible to the shop’s other workers as storage space, Nadia’s new makeshift home blurs the line between non-place and place. It demonstrates not only the possibility of transformation from one to the other, but also the possibility of belonging to a place

without claiming ownership to it.

While many have commented on Hamid's critique of neoliberal agendas in *HTGFRIRA*⁴², few have read *Exit West* as a critique in the same vein. According to Grace Hong, neoliberalism allows only "limited incorporation and affirmation of certain forms of racialized, gendered, or sexualized difference, insofar as this incorporation and affirmation preserves the fundamental process of Western political modernity—the ostensible protection of lives that enables the dispersal of death" (13-4). *Exit West* takes issue with the neoliberal affirmation of difference that nonetheless disperses death to those that fall outside its protection. With his project of universal mobility and open borders, Hamid proposes to implement an alternative morality, one that challenges the place-based ethics of identity formation and does away with the moral authority of "nativeness." Saeed's new partner, for example, is an African American political activist who advocates for the new refugees' and migrants' right to vote and have political representation. This idea of suffrage for all residents of California, she argues, "might at first have only a moral authority, but that authority could be substantial, for unlike those other entities for which some humans were not human enough to exercise suffrage, this new assembly would speak from the will of all the people, and in the face of that will, it was hoped, greater justice might be less easily denied (321). It is perhaps in this proposal to radically reconfigure rules of democratic participation in the form of a universalized citizenship that *Exit West* demonstrates its greatest optimism and utopic value. And Hamid's radical challenge on private ownership, especially land ownership, sets his narrative non-places apart from other texts I read in this dissertation.

Chapter V

“Ethnic Coverage”: The Economy of Racialized Visibility in *Native Speaker*

The previous three chapters delved into a number of contemporary Asian diasporic texts that negotiate the diasporic Asian community's cultural citizenship in relation to the proliferation of globalized neoliberal capital. Chapter two argues that Singaporean American author Kevin Kwan's *Crazy Rich Asians* series launches a new ethnic “pride-porn” genre that takes advantage of the neoliberal multiculturalist equation of free market exchange to “freedom”, which in turn prescribes a neoliberal aesthetic that can best be characterized as a form of “flexibility,” in its cultural, linguistic, political and financial forms. Chapter three argues that *Yellow Face* (2007) and *Chinglish* (2011) mark a clear thematic break in Chinese American playwright David Henry Hwang's theatrical project. Characterized by a self-conscious critique of the kind of identity politics upon which he had built a successful early career, Hwang's later projects are marked by efforts to grapple with earlier motifs of classic Asian American literature that align with the tenets of neoliberal multiculturalism. I read the theme of “transracial” identification of *Yellow Face* and the trans-linguistic experimentation of *Chinglish* as attempts to imagine a more flexible - or what Mikhail Epstein calls “transcultural” - identity. Ultimately, however, Hwang's transcultural experimentation, as with Epstein's theory, offers a utopic vision that cannot fully divest itself from the same neoliberal aesthetic technology of flexibility. Chapter four investigates Pakistani British writer Mohsin Hamid's most recent two novels, *How to Get Filthy Rich in Rising Asia* (2013) and *Exit West* (2017), both of which challenge the place-based ethics that is the foundation of the current discourse on immigration in the Global North. Using anthropologist Marc Augé's concept of the “non-

place”, I argue that Hamid’s novels create an alternative framework to the native vs. foreign or origin vs. destination binaries, thus problematizing the ways in which ethnic and immigrant literature traditionally narrate displacement and diasporic identity formation. While distinct in their own creative endeavors, these works each attempt to contend with, to varying degrees of success and commercial appeal, the ever increasing neoliberal demand for cultural, political, ethical and financial flexibility.

To round out my discussion, this concluding chapter takes a second look at an earlier historic period that sets the stage for the contemporary works examined in the previous chapters. Specifically, I reexamine the canonical Asian American text, *Native Speaker* (1995) by Chang-Rae Lee, which deploys economic tropes to narrate older immigrant themes such as forced assimilation and the model minority stereotype. Written and set in the mid 90s, this speculative fiction features protagonist Henry Park, a mercenary spy working for a private investigatory firm that specializes in its “ethnic coverage”. Established during the civil rights movement, Glimmer and Co. was founded on the recognition of identity politics as “a growth industry” (18). Its employees, all of whom are ethnic Americans, cultivate their racialized (in)visibility into a “natural cover” for espionage. Rather than heroism or patriotism, the firm’s business is driven by “some calculus of power and money,” its employees acting as deviant economic agents serving “any force or power competing in the global market to wield influence.” (17; Narkunas 328) While traditional spies deal in weaponry and state-of-the-art technology, Henry and his colleagues work the people - “foreign worker, immigrants, first-generationals, neo-Americans” - for the foreign and domestic governments and agencies that hire them (17).

Lee's formulation of Henry Park's "sub-rosa vocation" is a poignant observation of the Asian American condition, i.e., the paradox of being simultaneously hypervisible and invisible (Lee 47). As Kaja Silverman notes, "it is indeed possible to be invisible and yet still bear the marks of that erasure. Such a condition is one of in/visibility, where the hypervisibility of race is the precondition for the ways in which one is mis-seen or unseen" (165). In troping ethnic identity as artifice and façade, Lee critiques the imaginary and constructed nature of such identity and the alienation of the ethnic subject as a result of a bifurcation of the self as other, something akin to the Duboisian double-consciousness of "looking at one's self through the eyes of others" (Du Bois 5). "The voyeur's apprehension of his own specularity," as Silverman observes, "leads to the discovery that he 'exists for the Other'" (165). One could argue that, it is in the self-conscious contemplation and display of this specular otherness that Lee carves out a successful career as an Asian American writer.

In *Economic Citizens*, Christine So reads Asian American characters in canonical immigrant literature as economic agents who signal either excess or imbalance, therefore illuminating the racialized nature of capital. "Asians and Asian Americans have been represented historically and even more so in the current era as agents of capitalism gone awry" (8). That is, Asian diasporics are represented as either deviant or exemplary economic agents, either unfair competitors in the job market or model minorities, sometimes simultaneously both. *Native Speaker* present Asian Americans as deviant economic agents trafficking, and trafficked, in the circuits of racialized neoliberal economic exchanges. According to So, Asian Americans cannot be abstracted into

“undifferentiated nodes in the circuit of economic exchange or as disembodied national citizens” but are rather constructed as “hyperembodied racialized subjects” (9).

Native Speaker opens with the confession by Henry Park, a professional spy employed by a firm that specializes in ethnic espionage:

Each of us engaged in our own [ethnicity], more or less. Foreign workers, immigrants, first-generationals, neo-Americans. I worked with Koreans, Pete [Ichibata] with Japanese. We split up the rest, the Chinese, Laotians, Singaporeans, Filipinos, the whole transplanted Pacific Rim. Grace [Paley] handled Eastern Europe; Jack, the Mediterranean and Middle East; the two Jimmys, Baptiste and Perez, Central America and Africa" (17–18).

The firm’s logic of “ethnic coverage”, this passages suggests, depends on the epidermal similarities between its employees and target populations in a racialized field of vision. The existence of cultural informant spies, according to Narkunas, “specify how cultural, racial, and epidermal difference can be commodified and trafficked by capital, underscoring certain power formations crucial for thinking culture, ethnicity, and concepts of political liberalism in a global system, what Gilroy explores as instances of ‘corporate multiculturalism’ (31)”. College-educated and fluent English speakers, Henry and his colleagues have the requisite cultural capital to transform their otherwise limiting epidermal otherness into a form of racial capital, thus fulfilling the niche position on the shadowy borders of the post-Cold War neoliberal multiculturalist labor market. In many ways, the success of all the authors examined in “Capitalizing Race” are due in part to their self-conscious cultivation of their own racial and cultural otherness that fits the neoliberal multiculturalist market demands. While collaborating with neoliberal ideology

has served these authors well, some, like David Henry Hwang, are increasingly uncomfortable with the ways in which doing so undercuts the continued struggles of the Asian American community for political representation, which, as Peggy Phelan argues in *Unmarked*, is very different from mere visibility campaigns.

In order to effortlessly infiltrate their assigned communities, these ethnic spies - “most prodigal and mundane of historians” (18) - possess a shared ability to blend in to the background: “you must be at once convincing and unremarkable. It takes long training and practice, an understanding of one’s self-control and self-proportion: you must know your effective size in a given situation, the tenor at which you might best speak” (172). This ability to perform oneself in relation to one’s surroundings, Henry suggests, is the default Asian American disposition: “I thought I had final found my truest place in the culture” as a spy, “a perfect vocation of the person I was, someone who could reside in one place and take half steps out whenever he wished” (127). This observation encapsulates what Julia Kristeva terms the “actor’s paradox” of a foreign person, “multiplying masks and ‘false selves’ he is never completely true nor completely false, as he is able to tune in to loves and aversions the superficial antennae of a basaltic heart. A headstrong will, but unaware of itself, unconscious, distraught” (8).

Pondering on what his parents would think of his career choice had they known the truth, Henry comments that, “my father would choose to see my deceptions in a rigidly practical light, as if they were similar to that daily survival he came to endure, the need to adapt, assume an advantageous shape” (319). Although not directly alluded to, the same disposition also applies to Henry’s father, who is forced to give up his engineering training in Korea to become a green grocer in America, due to his lack of

English proficiency. While Mr. Park used to belong to a bustling Korean diasporic community, his first-generation immigrant friends eventually drifted apart, each moving into wealthier districts and making “drinking friend with Americans” (51). However, none of these friendships would yield deep connections, and Henry recalls with bitterness the ways his parents tiptoed round their predominantly white neighborhood, trying to be at once perfect and perfectly inconspicuous. He sees as a shameful lack of cultural assimilation that his mother would rather ruin a birthday cake than borrow a child’s pinch of sugar from their white neighbor, and that his father timidly excused a schoolyard bully for “taking advantage of [Henry’s] timidity and misunderstandings” (104). Although fearful of his adoptive land, Mr. Park works like a “gritty mule” and whole-heartedly subscribes to the rules of capitalism and the doctrines of Jesus Christ. However, his ambition never exceeds more than the acquisition of a few grocery stores and a large suburban house, eventually dying in a land that remains stubbornly foreign to him.

In setting up the Park family’s gritty assimilation tale as the foil to Henry’s career as an ethnic profiteer, Lee critiques the power of neoliberal capitalism in extracting the ethnic American subject into racialized labor. Similar to that of his father, Henry’s own “ugly immigrant’s truth” is that,

I have exploited my own, and those others who can be exploited. ... But I and my kind possess another dimension. We will learn every lesson of accent and idiom, we will dismantle every last pretense and practice you hold, noble as well as ruinous. You can keep nothing safe from our eyes and ears. This is your own history. We are your most perilous and dutiful brethren, the song of our hearts at once furious and sad. For only you could grant me these lyrical modes. I call

them back to you. Here is the sole talent I ever dared nurture. Here is all of my American education. (320)

In fashioning his neo-American characters as deviant economic agents who employ their racial capital to the detriment of their fellow minorities, Lee allegorizes the neoliberalization of forced assimilation of immigrants.

According to Jodi Kim, the novel comments on the Cold War logic of racialized capital distribution through the allegory of the Korean American “middleman minority.” Like the traditional middleman minority represented by small business owners like Henry’s father, who accumulates a modest fortune by filling up the often volatile borders between white suburbia and the black ghetto with their racialized bodies, Henry and his colleagues inhabit the shadowy grey zones of the global capitalism to act as “secret arbiters” of the invisible forces of corporate multiculturalism. Just as his father, who not so subtly exploits newer immigrants by paying low wages, Henry and his colleagues build their careers on the exploitation of their fellow ethnic Americans. “What unites these [ethnic] informants is the desire for access to power,” Narkunas observes, “serving up other humans as authentic members of the community within recognizable categories of identity and solidifying a type of corporatist multiculturalism” (341). Lee’s allegorical tale of Henry’s neoliberal American assimilation thus sets up stage for later works such as Hwang’s *Yellow Face*.

In comparison, Henry’s last assignment, New York City councilman and mayoral candidate John Kwang, seems to promise a better model for first generation immigrant assimilation. A self-made millionaire who launches his campaign on a pro-immigration and multiculturalist platform, Kwang appears to be the perfect example of “how [Henry]

imagined a Korean would be,” “a natural American,” and “the model by which [immigrants and minorities] will work and live” (304, 326). Unlike Mr. Park, whose lack of English skills denies him access to cultural and symbolic capital, Kwang ambitiously seeks cultural and political representation for immigrants like Henry’s father. Like Henry, however, Kwang’s job requires him to don a series of masks: “you will be many people all at once. You are a father, dictator, a servant, the most agile actor this land has ever known. And all throughout you must be the favorite chaste love of the people” (293). Like that of Henry’s father, Kwang’s tale of assimilation also mirrors that of Henry’s. Hired by an unknown entity, later revealed to be the IRS and the INS (Department of Homeland Security), Henry and his colleagues infiltrate and ultimately derail Kwang’s campaign. In this process, Henry unwittingly uncovers Kwang’s true “face hiding beneath the masks - an adulterer responsible for the murder of a beloved campaign volunteer, who was revealed to be a spy sent by Henry’s boss as his backup. However, the latter crime remains private till the end of the novel. Rather, what criminalizes Kwang and delegitimizes his campaign is what Henry finds out about Kwang’s involvement in sponsoring a pan-ethnic *ggeh*, an informal “community money club” that helps individual members pool communal resources on a rotating basis (328). Portrayed as an illegal banking practice and tax-evading operation by mainstream media, Kwang is transformed from a self-made millionaire businessman into a corrupt criminal ringleader.

Kwang’s political rise and demise, read as a casualty to the state regulation of corporatized cultural difference, signals the difficulty facing the “ethnic politician,” who strives to represent the economic interests of a multiethnic populous. According to Rachel Lee, while “Kwang invests in a notion of idealized representation that would

smooth over the historical contradiction between the United States' capitalist and political imperatives" Henry "operate[s] according to a notion of representation as inherently duplicitous and in league with a governmental operation of surveillance that renders the watched figure (e.g. the immigrant) a docile body more serviceable to the economy" (348). The ease with which Henry infiltrates the Kwang campaign and the instrumental role he plays in sabotaging it illuminate the pitfalls of identity-based politics - the belief that neoliberal corporate multiculturalism actually advances the interest of minorities who are willing to cooperate with the system by liquidating their ethnic affiliations.

In her analysis of the Cold War racial thematics of *Native Speaker*, Jodi Kim fashions a distinction between "ethnic small business capital" and "racialized undocumented capital" (124). Whereas small business owners like Henry's father are constructed by the state as model minorities, "racialized undocumented capital becomes sutured to the threatening variant of Asian presence within the US, the historical 'yellow peril'" (119). Thus, as soon as John Kwang's self-made millions become associated with the *ggeh*, a traditional Korean community lottery loan practice, he falls from the pedestal of the model minority to its antithesis, a yellow peril with a criminal banking practice for illegal immigrants. "While much is made of the free transnational flow of capital and bodies in the post-Cold War era of neoliberal triumphalism," Kim argues, "Lee shows how the nation-state documents, controls, racializes, and criminalizes certain kinds of flows" (129). In the same vein, Narcunas argues that,

Kwang's role as a politician—to represent the dispossessed so that they may participate

in US representational politics—is, therefore, no threat to the order of the state; rather, it is his money club and his aid to non-citizens that simultaneously offers a certain economic leveraging that their ethnicity, due to state racism, forecloses. (342)

While both Kim and Narcunas are astute in assessing Lee's critique of neoliberal multiculturalist regulation of racialized capital circulation by the state, I would venture a different conclusion. Namely, the delegitimization of the *ggeh* is but a smokescreen deployed by the state media machine to police the legitimate demands for greater ethnic economic participation and political representation. While a small portion of the *ggeh* participants are undocumented, the majority are legal immigrants. The eventual eradication of Kwang's pan-ethnic entrepreneurial operation with the help of Asian American spies (hired by the INS no less), illuminates the process through which legitimate minority attempts to participate in the neoliberal economy is rebuffed by state-sponsored corporate multiculturalism.

Kwan's eventual downfall recalls an earlier moment in the narrative, when, in an effort to curb Kwang's influence without appearing to be racist, the incumbent mayor De Roos openly "half-compliments Kwang in the media whenever he could, ... calling him 'a fervent voice in the wide chorus this is New York,'" all the while quietly assails him for "trying too hard to be all things to all people" (36). A career politician, De Roos knows "how the game should be run against an ethnic challenger: marginalize him, isolate him, acknowledge his passion but color it radical, name it zealotry" (36). Lastly, the concept of *ggeh* epitomizes the community-based operations of "Asian Capitalism," thus threatens the self-appointed supremacy of western style capitalism based on a more

rigid understanding of legality. Thus, in setting up the *ggeh* as the official reason for Kwang's political downfall, rather than his involvement in the murder of an underling, Lee highlights the primacy of the symbolic threat of the Asian capital in the US capitalist system, as well as the discourse of "illegality" surrounding such capital in the mainstream discourse on US immigration, elaborated in Hwang's *Yellow Face* and *Chinglish*.

Written at the heydays of identity politics and multiculturalism, *Native Speaker* simultaneously invokes and deconstructs the entrenched yellow peril narrative and stereotype of Asian Americans as aliens and spies via an ingenious economic metaphor. In *Double Agency*, Tina Chen suggests "that we decouple imposture from impersonation and understand these two types of performances as very different in intent if not always in effect" (xvii). That is, to read impersonation as "acts of multiple allegiance" and not of betrayal (xvii). Chen's de-coupling of the two mimetic acts according to their difference in intent and effect is significant. As she goes on to observe, "Asian Americans have impersonated themselves as subjects and agents, *not by imposturing whiteness, but by performing into existence their multiple allegiances and identities – often fractured, sometimes incoherent, but always necessary – as Asian Americans*" (xx). This act of impersonation perhaps also best encapsulates Lee's narrative practice. In laying bare the neoliberal multiculturalist imperatives that substitute minority visibility campaigns for political representation, Lee's narrative performs into existence multiple and flexible Asian American identities. And in so doing, it opens up a space for the later experiments that take this act of impersonation in different directions.

¹ <https://news.abs-cbn.com/entertainment/08/16/18/crazy-rich-asians-touted-as-hollywood-watershed>
<https://www.cbsnews.com/news/crazy-rich-asians-director-jon-m-chu-impact-watershed-moment/>

<https://www.vanityfair.com/hollywood/2018/08/crazy-rich-asians-casts-portfolio>
<https://www.france24.com/en/20180816-crazy-rich-asians-touted-hollywood-watershed>

² <http://nine.cnnphilippines.com/life/culture/literature/2017/08/29/kevin-kwan-interview.html>

³ Released in the spring of 2017, the ad featuring the 21-year-old white model defusing tension between police and protestors with a can of soda was quickly pulled by Pepsi due to public outcry. <https://www.nytimes.com/2017/04/05/business/kendall-jenner-pepsi-ad.html>

⁴ Pantene's 2013 "Labels Against Women" ad. <https://causemarketing.com/case-study/pantene-philippines-labels-women-case-study/>

⁵ Dove's "Campaign for Real Beauty" started with the 2006 video "Evolution", showing a time lapse video that critiques the warped perception of beauty perpetuated through the standard process of airbrushing in the beauty industry. It later evolved into a series of campaigns.

⁶ Budweiser's 2017 Superbowl ad featuring the life story of its founder, Adolphus Busch a German immigrant. <https://www.npr.org/sections/thesalt/2017/02/03/513263766/budweiser-s-super-bowl-ad-misses-the-real-timelier-story-about-immigrants-and-be>

⁷ <https://www.hollywoodreporter.com/features/crazy-rich-asians-how-asian-rom-happened-netflix-1130965>

⁸ Ibid.

⁹ I give a detailed survey of these critiques in the opening section of chapter two.

¹⁰ See *Imagine Otherwise* by Kandice Chuh

¹¹ Especially the creation of the H1B visa category in 1990

¹² According to Pew, 49% of US Asian adults above age 25 earning a bachelor's degree or more, compared to 31% for whites and the national average of 28%. An average US Asian household has an income of \$66,000, compared to \$54,000 for whites and the national average of \$49,800. <https://www.pewsocialtrends.org/2012/06/19/the-rise-of-asian-americans/>

¹³ Out of all Asians living in the US, 74.1% are foreign-born, and only 58.9% of foreign-born Asians have US citizenship. Ibid.

¹⁴ <https://news.abs-cbn.com/entertainment/08/16/18/crazy-rich-asians-touted-as-hollywood-watershed>
<https://www.cbsnews.com/news/crazy-rich-asians-director-jon-m-chu-impact-watershed-moment/>
<https://www.vanityfair.com/hollywood/2018/08/crazy-rich-asians-casts-portfolio>
<https://www.france24.com/en/20180816-crazy-rich-asians-touted-hollywood-watershed>

¹⁵ For articles on the wealth porn genre, see the articles below.

https://www.salon.com/2013/09/06/why_we_read_new_york_times_wealth_porn/,
<https://www.theguardian.com/tv-and-radio/2017/mar/06/big-little-lies-fifty-shades-grey-darker-billions-wealth-porn>, and <https://www.cbsnews.com/news/wealth-porn/>

¹⁶ "'Crazy Rich Asians': Guilty Pleasure, or Cult of Opulence?"

<https://www.nytimes.com/2013/07/01/books/kevin-kwans-crazy-rich-asians-depicts-a-cult-of-opulence.html>

¹⁷ <https://amara.org/en/videos/auKo2EsU1jwW/info/asian-pride-porn-directed-by-greg-pak/>

¹⁸ "Crazy Rich Asians' is not a Radical Win for Representation"

<https://wearyourvoicemag.com/more/entertainment/crazy-rich-asians-not-radical-win-representation>

¹⁹ "Where are the brown people? Crazy Rich Asians draws tepid response in Singapore"

<https://www.theguardian.com/film/2018/aug/21/where-are-the-brown-people-crazy-rich-asians-draws-tepid-response-in-singapore>

²⁰ <https://www.nytimes.com/2018/08/21/opinion/crazy-rich-asians-movie.html>

²¹ <https://www.newyorker.com/culture/cultural-comment/crazy-rich-asians-and-the-end-point-of-representation>

²² As I elaborate in chapter one, a number of recent scholarships address the ways in which Asian American subjecthood is both shaped by market economy and articulated in the languages of capital and transaction. In *Flexible Citizenship* (1999), Aiwha Ong proposes to view diasporic

Asian subjects as flexible global citizens, whose cosmopolitan mobility allows them to reap the benefits of globalization. In *Economic Citizens* (2007), Christine So highlights the hyper visibility of Asian Americans as racialized bodies, despite global capital's characteristic hyper abstraction of individuals into pure human capital. "Asians have historically symbolized economic imbalance," argues So, "an association that reveals certainly that racialized identities are constructed through the machine of capital but also that economics itself is racialized" (14). In her chapter "Late (Global) Capitalism," Laura Kang examines recent stages of the "Asianization" of global capitalism, attending to "the 'Asian' as appended to capital in terms of the shifting international political economy of accumulation, debt, and fiscal deficit" (Lee 301). Although these texts contest the perimeters of Asian American or Asian diasporic subjecthood, they also contribute to their redefinition and reinforcement.

²³ In her book review in *The Guardian*, for example, Patricia Park praises the series' first volume as a breath of fresh air, creating "a new wave of stereotypes" of the Asian diasporic. Kwan isn't afraid to tap into the irony of "those being stereotyped stereotyp[ing] right back," Park observes, thus producing "a reversal of the collective gaze." "*Crazy Rich Asians* presents a whole new wave of stereotypes" <https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2013/sep/03/crazy-rich-asians-racial-stereotypes>

²⁴ Hokkien racial slur for white people.

²⁵ Author's footnote: "Hokkien for 'big cock.'" *Crazy Rich Asians*.

²⁶ With the rise of Asia in global economy, increasing numbers of wealthy Asians are purchasing antiques lost to colonial theft, garnering much media attention. In mainstream Chinese news, for example, these purchases made by Chinese citizens or expats tend to be reported as "reclamation" of stolen national treasures, rather than the acquisition of private property.

²⁷ A term for the Singaporean old money.

²⁸ See works such as *Imagine Otherwise* by Kandice Chuh.

²⁹ Hwang says in an interview about his inspiration for the story.

³⁰ White actors playing Asian roles with the aid of yellow-tinted makeup, similar to blackface.

³¹ Literal translation from the Chinese "丢脸," meaning "being embarrassed."

³² A detailed account of the 1996 Campaign finance controversy can be found in Ling-chi Wang's "Beyond Identity and Racial Politics: Asian Americans and the Campaign Fund-raising Controversy," (*Asian American Law Journal*, volume 5).

³³ 周生梦蝶

³⁴ <https://www.chicagotribune.com/ct-ae-0717-chinglish-lim-20110716-story.html>

³⁵ Anderson, B. (2006). *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism* (Rev. ed.). London ; New York: Verso.

³⁶ "干" (shield) is favored over "幹" (do) and "乾" (dry) for its formal simplicity, and has replaced them. However, the word "乾," with a different pronunciation and meaning, "qian," is still in usage in simplified Chinese. From 崔明海, 《文字与国家:近代简体字运动的兴起及其社会纷争》, 史学集刊。 (06/2010)

³⁷ Taking one step further than "postcolonial writers whose narratives self-consciously engage with their own linguistic hybridity by explicitly thematizing the negotiation between different linguistic strands," Wilson observes, "the narratives of transnational writers explore new identities by constructing new dialogic spaces that, at once, foreground, perform and problematize the act of translation" (46). *Words, Images and Performances in Translation*. Eds. Rita Wilson and Brigid Maher.

³⁸ According to *Guanxi and Business Strategy*, "Guanxi (关系) is a sociological term that describes a subset of Chinese personal connections between people (relationships) in which one individual is able to prevail upon another to perform a favor or service (Chung/Hamilton 2002: 2f.). It lies in the skillful mobilization of moral imperatives in pursuit of diffuse and calculated instrumental ends."

³⁹ In *Undoing the Demos: Neoliberalism's Stealth Revolution*, Wendy Brown observes that neoliberalism is profoundly dangerous not as "a set of economic policies, an ideology, or a resetting of the relation between state and economy" but "as a normative order of reason developed over three decades into a widely and deeply disseminated governing rationality, neoliberalism transmogrifies every human domain and endeavor, along with humans themselves, according to a specific image of the economic" (Brown 8-9).

⁴⁰ For Walker, Hamid writes against the typical self-help genre's neoliberal demand for a cruel optimism by revealing the detrimental effect of "your" single-tracked sprint towards filthy richness, and by gesturing towards a "richness elsewhere" (199).

⁴¹ Augé distinguishes his "non-place" from that of de Certeau, which stresses the "negative quality of place, an absence of the place from itself, caused by the name it has been given" (69). For Augé, "the act of passing gives a particular status to place names, that the fault line resulting from the law of the other and causing a loss of focus, is the horizon of every journey (accumulation of places, negation of the place), and that the movement that 'shifts lines' and traverses places is, by definition, creative of itineraries: that is, words and non-places" (69).

⁴² See Savu-Walker, Poon, Naydan, and Alonso-Breto.

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